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VOL. IV. \$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 William Street, New York.

Price, No. 51.
Five Cents.



"MY BRACELET HAS COME UNFASTENED; CAN YOU FIX IT FOR ME?" SAID ARMANDE, EXTENDING HER ARM TO DE LESPARRE.

LED ASTRAY.

BY OCTAVE FEUILLET.

CHAPTER I.

THE HOME OF WEALTH.

RODOLPH CHANDOCE lived within a few hours' ride of Paris. His home was all that the most

fastidious taste, backed by a very heavy purse, could devise, and if it was ever the lot of mortal man to be happy, Rodolph Chandoce should have been one of those men who could truly say: "I know no sorrow."

His family consisted of his second wife, Armande, a lovely woman of some twenty-four or five years, who loved him despite the slights her more mature husband put upon her in favor of his club, his hounds, his horses, or a new face.

The latter especially, if it chanced to belong to some young, fascinating woman, ever exercised the greatest influence over Chandoce, and he invariably forgot that his wife, who should have claimed the greatest portion of his time, was left alone to while away the weary hours of her husband's absence, in any way that presented itself.

Armande was a devoted wife; but, unfortunately for herself, her whole life had become tinged with a morbid sentimentality produced by a certain class of reading, which her lonely life had caused her to peruse for consolation and amusement.

Mathilde, Chandoce's daughter by his first wife, was just budding into womanhood, and looked upon her step-mother more in the light of a sister or dear friend, rather than a mother.

A merry, light-hearted girl she was, consulting only her own pleasure in accordance with the teachings she had received; but possessing a heart as pure and loving as could be desired.

Of Rodolph Chandoce himself, we will attempt no description, leaving the reader to form his or her own idea. But of the other two inmates of the Chandoce home, we must say a few words. The first, and in her own opinion, the most important, is the countess, Rodolph's mother. A woman considerably past the prime of life, and believing that her son's home is her home, and that her son's wife has no rights which she, as her son's mother, has any reason to respect. The countess was one of the most strongly marked types of a mother-in-law, and one well calculated to make any woman's life unhappy.

Armande's mother, who, in her own right, bore the title of baroness, was also a member of this strangely assorted household group. When we say that the baroness was Armande's mother, we do not by any means imply that Madame Chandoce was blessed with a mother's tender, watchful care. Quite the contrary; her burden—be it in fact or imaginary—was very palpably increased by the presence of her mother.

Having thus particularly introduced the inmates of the chateau to the reader, we will open our story at the risk of being tedious, with a description of one who occupies a very prominent part in this romance.

Hector Placide was one of those good-natured fellows whose noble hearts are often hidden by a trifling, careless manner, but whose real worth is sure to become apparent in hours of trial and sorrow. He was rather below the medium height, fair complexion, and with a face almost girlish in its outline, and, in order to make him more interesting, we will say that he was deeply and ardently in love with Mathilde.

It was to indulge in dreams of love, and perhaps to build a few castles in the air, that Hector sauntered out upon the lawn which surrounded the chateau.

He was aroused from his rose-colored reverie into which he had fallen by the sound of rustling garments, and, looking up, saw, not Mathilde, as he had expected, but her step-mother, who was walking slowly along, and so deeply occupied with a book which she held in her hands, as to be unconscious of Hector's proximity.

"Reading a novel as usual," muttered Hector to himself. "There must be something delightful in feeling the misfortunes of some one else, or newspapers would not be so full of disasters, and novels so full of interesting crime. She actually sheds tears over imaginary woes, as if she had no real ones of her own."

This soliloquy was interrupted by a harmless sort of a fop, who rejoiced in the happy name of Mount Gosline, and who, like Hector, was a guest of Rodolph Chandoce.

As Gosline approached and noticed who it was that Hector was regarding so earnestly, he laughed in a silly, half-a-strawberry sort of a laugh, and said, as he tapped Hector upon the shoulder:

"She's a splendid creature, eh?"

"Oh, baron, is that you?" exclaimed Hector, noticing Gosline for the first time. "I beg your pardon. What did you say?"

"I said that she was a splendid creature. How are you getting on in that quarter?"

"I don't understand you," replied Hector, thoroughly mystified as to his friend's meaning.

"In order that we may both be frank," said the baron, in a tone which was intended to be both patronizing and friendly, "let me ask you what your position is in this chateau?"

"What my position is? why it is exactly the same as yours. I, like you, have been invited to spend a few days in this chateau."

"Where I have fallen in love with the wife and daughter of my host," interrupted the baron, with a leer that was intended to betoken confidence and happiness.

"Both at once, baron?" asked Hector, not a little surprised at this wholesale love making.

"Yes, both at once. They are equally lovely; a bud and a flower upon one stalk." This seemed to the baron to be a very brilliant idea; for no sooner had he uttered it than a happy smile illumined his countenance, and with a self-satisfied air, he exclaimed: "What a sweet idea that was! What a happy thought! I'll book that," and true to his habit of writing down anything he had said that he thought particularly good, the baron made a note of his little idea, and then asked: "Are you not related to the count in some way?"

"His wife is my cousin."

"Did you know his first wife, Mathilde's mother?"

"Very well indeed. I was in the habit of spending my vacations here. Mademoiselle Chandoce and I were play-fellows."

"Ah, yes, I see," replied the baron, with the cutting sarcasm of a man of the world that can never be answered. "I can now understand the familiar indifference with which she treats you. She seems to look on you as one of the family; in fact, a sort of nobody in particular."

"Perhaps so," replied Hector, determined not to let Gosline see how hard his random shot had hit.

"Did you ever try it on with her?"

"Try what on?" asked Hector beginning to lose his temper.

"Why, make love to the count's daughter on the sly."

"I should as soon think of pocketing his spoons," replied Hector, indignantly.

"Yes—yes; I see. You are in love with his wife," said the baron, in a confident tone.

"Baron," replied Hector, with dignity, "your life has been passed on the race-course, and in the gambling saloons of Hamburg and Baden, and you have formed your ideas from the society you met there; there are honest, true people in the world, and the young Countess Chandoce is one of them."

His speech, well calculated to convince anyone, so far from persuading the baron of the truth of his companion's remarks, caused him to hold his own opinion still more strongly, and he answered in a jeering tone:

"I suppose that Miss O'Hara is another honest, true woman?"

"Miss O'Hara! Who is she?" asked Hector, not a little puzzled at his companion's remark.

"The girl we met at the ball, last week, who wore her hair so high and the back of her dress so low: you must have seen her."

"Yes, I saw a good deal of her," replied Hector, with a shade of sarcasm in his voice.

"Eh?" asked Gosline, for the moment not understanding the point of Hector's remark and then as it dawned upon him, he gave utterance to his sickly laugh, and with the stereotyped remark of: "Happy thought; I'll book it," wrote the joke down for future reference.

"She is a noted horsewoman," continued Gosline. "The count, our host, says he never saw a girl so much at home in the saddle."

"Yes, she's just the kind of a woman to captivate Rodolph."

"She excels in all; she shoots, hunts and rows like a man. She's a perfect Diana!"

"In all but the chastity," added Hector.

"Happy thought! I'll repeat that when I can find a chance, and I'll——"

"Don't book it," interrupted Hector, "for it is as worthless as the woman who provoked it."

"Be careful of what you say, for she is coming here."

"To this house?" asked Placide, in perfect amazement.

"Certainly. Why not?" She is received everywhere in that locomotive society that stretches from Spa to Naples. There is no record against her but the contents of her jewel-case," replied Gosline, in his inimitable, impudent way.

"Here comes the old countess," said Hector, not answering his companion's remark, as he caught a glimpse of Chandoce's mother from amidst the shrubbery.

"Let me get out of the way!" exclaimed Gosline, in real alarm, as he looked about for some avenue of escape. "She caught me this morning in the still-room, watching pretty little Sophie count the linen. I was just going to kiss her, when she cried out: 'Oh, Lord!—the countess!' I turned, and there in the doorway stood the old griffin herself, looking like—the devil!"

This comparison was not exactly what Gosline would have said, but was called forth by his turning his head slightly and seeing the subject of his conversation standing almost directly behind him. With a look at Placide that was comical in the last degree, Gosline disappeared in the shrubbery.

CHAPTER II.

FORTUNATELY for Gosline, the countess was conversing with Lafontaine, an old servant, who had served Armande's parents for many years, and she did not hear the very uncomplimentary remark which had been made.

Hector could not refuse a smile at the very undignified retreat made by his companion, but he instantly repressed it as he heard the old lady say:

"My good man, I am sorry for you; your daughter's conduct is not becoming my son's house, and cannot be tolerated."

"She is my only child, madame," replied the old man in a perfectly respectful but entreating voice. "This is her first service and her first fault—if indeed it be one. Should you send her away without a character——"

"I never break my word," replied the countess, in a tone intended to bring the conversation to a close. "I then said that the girl shall go, and go she must."

Without another word of reply, the old servant turned and walked sadly away. His only child, and she motherless, was to be dismissed from service, without a character and without

money, and why? Because one of the count's guests, struck with the girl's beauty, had conceived the idea of kissing her against her will, and in attempting to carry his insolent purpose into execution, the countess had seen him.

"Ah, Hector!" exclaimed the countess, as she saw Placide, "have you seen my daughter-in-law?"

"I think she is taking her favorite walk by the lake yonder," replied the young man, pointing in the same direction as that taken by Armande.

"She is probably lying in a romantic attitude, filling her mind with novels and trash, instead of attending to her household duties," replied the old lady, with a world of hate and scorn in her voice. "It is the fault of her mother, the baroness, frivolous old creature! Oh! here she comes. She announces herself by the screech of her skirts. I am sorry she has no friend to tell her that this love of finery is contemptible in a person of her age."

As she had said, the Baroness de la Rivonniere was approaching, and the countenances of the two ladies as they beheld each other was, to say the least, very amusing. Both had an inordinate love of dress, and each tried to outvie the other in display.

As the two ladies confronted each other with bows and smiles, Hector stepped forward with a chair, which he offered, and both were on the point of accepting it, when suddenly noticing the motions of the other, they drew their fussy little bodies up to their full height, and motioned each other to take the proffered seat.

"Madame, pray be seated," entreated the baroness, with a stately bow, and a wave of the hand toward the chair.

"You forget I am in my own house, madame," replied the countess, with great assumption of dignity; "you must allow me to play the hostess."

By this time Hector had brought another chair, so that the vexed question was settled, and the two ladies settled their flounces and ruffles into the seats in such a spiteful manner, that Hector plainly foresaw a ladylike quarrel.

The countess opened the ball by saying:

"I hope you passed a good night, madame?"

"The wind made an awful noise in the rookery," replied the baroness, determined to find fault with something, and thus keep the ball in motion.

"Unfortunately, we cannot control the elements in the country," was the sarcastic rejoinder.

"Ah!" exclaimed the baroness, as if plunged into sudden ecstasy by her thoughts, "we can in Paris. I dislike the country," and here the aristocratic nose turned perceptibly upwards; "it is so dismal; nothing but trees and grass,

and things. Not a shop, not a street anywhere, and if one is dying, no doctor."

"I live here all the year round; I am never ill," answered the countess, in a tone of calm superiority.

Not a very shrewd general was the old countess, or she would never have left the enemy such a chance for a shot. The baroness saw her opportunity, and she followed it up with a home thrust.

"Thoroughbred and sensitive natures like mine cannot endure what yours appears to thrive upon."

This volley of bitter-sweets was becoming almost too furious for Hector, and in the hope of averting the impending storm, he said to the baroness:

"But the sea, madame—you like the sea-side?"

"I like the society one finds there, but I hate the sea. When I go on the beach, I almost turn my back to it, it is so dreadful monotonous. Always the same sands and the same waves come in and go out without any cause. No one knows why."

"Are you ignorant, madame, that the moon causes the tide?" hastily interrupted the countess, happy at being able to show a little of her superior wisdom.

"I neither know, madame, nor care," replied the enraged old lady; "but I know that it makes me nervous to watch it. I like the country or the sea-side for a change—a month or two in the season; but if the count means to settle down here all the year round—oh, well," and the sigh which followed the exclamation seemed to be drawn from the very bottom of the old lady's heart. "I pity my poor child; don't you, Hector?"

"Very much, baroness," replied Placide, determined to venture no opposite opinion.

"My son, madame, is a noble of the old race," exclaimed the countess, in as much of a rage as she thought was allowable in one of her position in society; "his home is in his feudal castle; his tastes are those of his ancestors—field sports and manly occupations. Such a life is more becoming than such an existence as you spend in town, breaking down six pairs of carriage-horses and three coachmen per diem, in racing from concert to dinner, from dinner to opera, and from opera to ball. Don't you think so, Hector?"

True to his resolve to coincide with the views of both the ladies, and forgetting for the moment the answer he had made to the question of the baroness, Hector answered:

"You are right, countess."

"But you professed the opposite opinion just now," exclaimed Madame de la Rivonniere.

"I never contradict a lady," replied Hector,

with a low bow that was intended to be conciliatory.

"But how do you feel?" insisted the baroness.

"Do you wish me to speak candidly?" asked Placide, finding that he was expected to give a decided opinion.

"Certainly!" replied the baroness, with a haughty toss of her head which plainly said: "Of course you will agree with me."

A twinkle of satisfaction came into Hector's eyes as he said:

"I feel like the bottle of oil in a cruet-stand—between the vinegar and the pepper."

With exclamations of anger, the two ladies started from their chairs as if stung by a serpent, and turned to leave the garden.

CHAPTER III.

THE entrance of Mathilde interrupted what might have proved to be a very unpleasant scene, at least, for Hector.

"Oh, cousin Hector!" she exclaimed, as she almost ran towards the young man, while a slight frown contracted her fair brow, and a dainty little pout made her mouth look even more kissable than nature intended it should. "Where have you been? How can you be so provoking as to be out of the way when I want you?"

"Or in the way when you don't," retorted the young man, laughingly, as he gazed with a lover's eyes upon the object of his adoration.

"Ah! good-day, grandma!" and like the humming bird as it coquettishly flits from flower to thorn, the young lady turned towards the bottle of vinegar, as Hector had pictured her.

The countess' face was lighted up by a placid smile as she responded to this greeting with a patronizing bow, and as gentle a "Good-day, my child," as one could expect from the sharp-cut, sternly formed mouth.

"Good-day, my other grandma!" said Mathilde, turning to the baroness, and then, hardly waiting for the responsive "Bless you, darling!" she flitted again to Hector's side, and with an arch little smile upon her rosy lips, she said, coaxingly:

"Cousin, you are in a very, very obliging mood?"

"Very!" said Hector, dryly. "So much so, in fact, that your grandmothers reproached me with it."

"Well, in that case you can do me a service"

"I thought so; it is a commission," said Hector, looking down pleasantly upon the upturned face.

"It is," replied Mathilde, decidedly, and at the same time in a half-pleading tone, such as

one uses when sure that their request will be complied with. "I want you just to ride over to the town."

"Eleven miles," added Hector, with a laugh. "Go on!"

"To my *modiste*——"

"And ask her why she did not send home your new riding-hat she promised yesterday, and then bring it back with me."

"Oh, you must be a conjurer!" exclaimed the young girl, delighted at thus having her wishes anticipated.

"I overheard you complaining last night to Armande."

"What long ears you have got."

"I fear so," said Hector, with a grimace, as he tried to stretch out the guilty members.

"I thought you were engaged in playing whist."

"No. I was engaged in listening to you, therefore I lost the game."

"You are an angel," Mathilde declared, as she gave him one of her sweetest smiles, and shot at him a glance with just enough love in it to make, as she knew it would, the young man her willing slave. "But you must be off quickly, and you will be back by the time breakfast is over. So, run along—there's a dear," and Mathilde's tiny hand was laid upon his shoulder, as if to aid in his departure.

"Pardon me if I hazard the remark—absurd at such a moment—but when am I supposed to breakfast?" asked Hector, with a bow of mock homage and deprecation.

"Poor Hector!" was the laughing, and intended to be commiserating exclamation. "I'll run and find you something cold before you go."

"If you will be so obliging," said the baroness, who had been an amused listener to the conversation, to Hector, "you must take the consequences."

"I have such a delicious riding habit made," said Mathilde, in a half explanatory way, "but it will be nothing without the hat, and papa will be so proud of me when I ride beside him to-day in the hunting field, and I shall be so proud of him."

At this praise of her son, the countess looked the gratitude she felt, and was about to make some reply, when Mathilde added, as a sudden thought flitted across her mind:

"Ah, cousin! please bring with you some blue feathers, pale blue, as I'm rather afraid of the white," and then turning to the old lady, she said. "Come, grandmother, I want to show you my habit."

Hector watched her with lover's eyes, as she walked away with each hand on the arm of one of her grand-parents, and if he hoped that she would address some remark to him before she

went, he was not disappointed, for turning, she cried:

"You won't forget the blue feathers?"

"No—no!" answered Hector, with just a shade of disappointment apparent in his voice. And it did not escape Mathilde's ear, for she added the sweetness to the bitter by saying:

"You are the most adorable of men! I don't know how I could possibly live without you."

Hector Placide walked away with anything but enviable feelings, and had he spoken them they would have been very much like this:

"She says she could not live without me; she makes similar remarks every hour; tortures me with her affectionate indifference, and I have been mad enough to fall in love with that child."

He had not taken many steps before he saw Armande, who was seated in the shrubbery with a book in her hand, and listening to something which the old servant, Lafontaine, was saying.

Hector was just in time to hear the young countess say:

"Do not distress yourself, Lafontaine! Sophie shall not be dismissed. I will take her into my personal service."

Ordinarily, Hector would not have been guilty of the crime of listening; but as he had heard of Sophie's dismissal by the old countess with sorrow, so was he anxious to know that the threatened grievous wrong was not to be done.

With every sign of gratitude upon his honest face, Lafontaine left his young mistress' presence with a much lighter heart than when he had entered it.

As the servant left her, and Armande thought she was once more alone, she read a few more lines in the book, and then closed it, laid her head in her hand as she said aloud:

"Poor Clara! Poor, lonely, deserted wife! How true this description is, and yet the book was written by a man."

Then, taking up the book once more, she looked at the title page and read: "*Astray; a novel in three volumes, by George de Lesparre.*"

"George de Lesparre, you and I are kindred souls!" Armande exclaimed, and opening the book again, commenced reading, while Hector stole softly away, muttering to himself:

"If she knew George de Lesparre as well as I do, she would deny the kindred. The count is to blame. He treats his young and ardent wife with indifference, allowing her imagination to run riot. I'll speak to him on the subject."

CHAPTER IV.

HECTOR PLACIDE had not far to go in order to find Count Chandoce. Full of his determin-

ation to speak to the count in regard to his wife, Hector proceeded in the direction of the stables, where, as he rightly supposed, he should find Chandoce.

As Hector approached, the count was giving some orders to his huntsman.

"Let the dogs be ready at the Willow Farm by eleven," he was saying. "We shall try the Beeches first, and then drive up the wind towards——" and as he saw Placide's good-natured face, he accosted him with: "Ah! Hector, my boy, good-morning."

"Rodolph," said Placide, earnestly, "I want to say a word to you on a serious matter."

"Proceed; I am all attention," replied Chandoce; and then showing just how much attention he was giving to his guest, he said to the huntsman: "Send Robert to me, I will give him directions;" and again turning to Hector he continued: "Now, what is the——tell him I shall ride the chestnut." This last command was to the huntsman again, and a frown, that he could not repress, came upon Placide's usually pleasant face.

But as if all unconscious that he was doing anything else than attending to what his guest had to say, Rodolph continued:

"So it is a serious matter. What is it?"

"You are not in a serious mood," replied Hector, gravely.

With a hearty laugh, Rodolph threw himself upon a seat, as he exclaimed:

"There! now I am at anchor, go on!"

"Rodolph, old fellow," and Hector's voice was almost trembling with emotion, "you know how sincerely I am attached to you and yours?"

"I know all that, Hector."

"It is this feeling alone which prompts me to speak."

"Hello!" exclaimed Chandoce, in some surprise. "What sort of game is going to start from the bush after all this beating!"

"Have you decided on retiring from Paris, and shutting yourself up for the rest of your life in the country?"

"Quite decided," replied Chandoce. "Nature has given me formal notice to leave that charming metropolis, where for sixteen years I was the Romeo of private life. Last winter my barber discovered a certain scarcity of thatch on my scalp, and a few gray hairs in my beard. It was time to give up the juvenile business before I was cast for the old man, and as that was a line I was not respectable enough to undertake, I resolved to retire from the stage of society, and here I am."

"You will never settle down——"

"Into fat and agriculture?" interrupted Rodolph, laughing. "Yes, I shall. I'll raise cattle, breed horses, become a magistrate and a substantial personage."

"And how about your wife?" asked Hector, with no little anxiety in his tones.

"My wife—Armande? Oh, she is one of those kind——"

The count was interrupted in his description of his wife by the entrance of Robert, who had been sent for by the huntsman, and, as if his sport was of infinitely more importance than the woman who had married him, he ceased speaking of her, and said to Robert:

"Robert, I wish one of the boys to take the bay filly into the twenty-acre field, and ride some of the nonsense out of her before my daughter tries her this morning. She is rather hot and fidgety."

"Mademoiselle rides well," Robert ventured to say.

"Too well. She will get into trouble. And Robert, send a spare horse for me to the Beauvais cross-roads—the gray will do."

"Very good, sir," replied Robert, as he moved away.

"Let me see," said the count, tapping his forehead as if to recall himself to the subject of conversation previous to his remark to Robert; "what were we talking about? These dogs and horses have quite put it out of my head."

"That's it, precisely!" exclaimed Hector, impatiently. "Three years ago you married a young and lovely girl. After a month or two you returned to your old haunts, your old companions, your club, your betting-book, cards, dissipation, put your wife out of your head—you had sworn to love and cherish her—and you forgot what you had promised. Then you came down here, and now your horses and dogs take her place in your life."

"And so I am to go back to Paris because she will be miserable in the country," said the count, impatiently. "Don't be deceived; she will be miserable anywhere. Her complaint is not of me, nor of anyone, nor of circumstances—it is her vocation to be wretched; she was born so."

"But, my dear friend——"

"I love her," interrupted the count, quickly. "I don't repent my choice. She has all the charms and perfections you ascribe to her."

"What is her fault, then?" asked Hector, with some surprise.

"She is a woman, and every woman has a ruling caprice—some characterizing weakness." And the count's tone was very like what he would have used in talking of his horses, and his dogs, although, had he been speaking of them there would have been more solicitude visible. "Her pretension is to be considered wretched. To be thoroughly miserable is her greatest happiness; if she can arouse sympathy and excite commiseration, she swims in tears and delight. She has been, she is, and always will be, an object of com-

passion. All the blessings under Heaven are disregarded by her. She is young, lovely, rich, in good health. She has a good-tempered fellow for a husband. I'm not a bad sort, am I? No. Am I mean, false, disagreeable in mind, manners, or person? No. Have I ever denied her a single wish? Not one. Then what does she want? If she will be wretched, what can I do? My home was just as cloudy in Paris as it is here. I brought the rain with me, so I must sit down under it, grin and bear it, eh? Of course. Then, that's settled. I'm off."

And as if the matter was ended, the count started towards the stables; but Hector had no idea of closing the conversation at this point.

"Stop!" he exclaimed, catching Chandoce by the arm. "You settle everything by putting questions and answering them yourself. Yes, you are one of those men who think that by giving a woman a dozen rings, a box at the opera for the season, a carriage and pair, and unlimited credit with her dressmaker you fulfil all her reasonable desires and tastes. Have you ever offered her a dozen hours of your day, a place for the evening by your side? And have you opened unlimited credit with your heart?"

"This is all romantic nonsense," replied the count, with a slight show of anger. "I was good enough for my first wife—Mathilde's mother—God bless her!"

"My dear Rodolph, your first wife was a lamb, and spoiled you. Your first wife played husband, saw all your faults, forgave them with the sweetness of an angel and forgot them until she was on her deathbed."

"Oh, Hector!" replied the count, with emotion, "she did not reproach me then. You stood beside me as she held my hands."

"Yes," was Hector's decided answer, "and looking into your face, she said, 'My poor Rodolph, what will become of you when I am gone?' The gentle creature foresaw her successor, and the danger your infidelities would provoke."

"Danger!" cried the count, almost in alarm.

"What do you mean?"

"Any other woman," and now Hector's voice attested to the truth of what he said—"I mean one who had loved you less devotedly, might go astray; but Armande will pine and wither under this estrangement."

"Nonsense!" and despite the expression of contempt which Chandoce used, his hearer knew that he was for the moment touched.

"In fact," continued Hector, "she is pining. You don't see it, but the fact remains, nevertheless."

"All to excite sympathy—to elicit compassion."

"Her health is failing; she is drooping," continued Hector, determined to put the matter in as plain a light as possible.

"Pooh! nothing of the kind," sneered the count. "Nobody notices a change."

"I assure you she is greatly altered," said Hector earnestly. "Everybody notices the change——"

He ceased speaking, because at this moment, Armande herself appeared from the shubbery.

CHAPTER V.

As Armande approached the two gentlemen, her husband looked at her earnestly, as if trying to discover some signs of the failing health that Hector had spoken of.

"Are you not quite well, my dear?" asked Rodolph, as he went carelessly towards his wife, and asked the question in a tone which showed plainly that he had made the inquiry more for the sake of convincing his companion than for his own information.

"Me?" asked Armande, in some surprise at this very unusual solicitude. "Oh, yes; I am quite well."

"Are you quite sure? have you no weakness—no complaint?"

"None whatever," replied Armande, as she walked a short distance away as if to escape his questioning.

The count, who was quite satisfied as to what the answer would be before he asked the question, turned away to attend to some more important business than that of his wife's health, and as he passed Hector, he whispered:

"What did I tell you? there is nothing the matter;" and touching his forehead significantly, he added: "A crack in the china, bees in her bonnet—that's all."

And then he went to the stables to see his sick dogs, whose slightest symptoms of illness did not fail to catch his eye, leaving his wife to the companionship of a young, good-looking and sympathizing gentleman, whose devotion could not fail of being appreciated.

"I know what you have been saying about me to Rodolph as well as if I had heard you," Armande said to Placide after a few moments of silence. "I am grateful for your sympathy, for I get very little compassion save from you."

Could Hector have prevented it, he would have had her leave those words unsaid.

"I am resigned to my fate," continued Armande. "My husband is everything that is charming. Everybody says so, and of course it must be true. I am envied by my sex. There, we have said enough about it, so don't speak of it again."

"Whom have we to breakfast this morning?" asked Hector, trying to turn the conversation,

which he had seen, before he spoke, was distasteful.

"Really, I do not know," was the careless answer. "I am but a cipher down here. The countess, Rodolph's mother, is mistress, and I am only a guest in the house. But I believe I did hear who was coming. There's Major O'Hara and his sisters, and two or three horsemen, I suppose."

"Do you know why I asked?"

"No."

"Because I await in terror the arrival of your hero," said Hector.

"My hero?" asked Armande, in surprise.

"The one introduced to you by all such books as that," replied Hector, pointing to the book which Armande held in her hand. "The pensive, wild-haired, pale and inspired scoundrel, who is only saved from being a convict because he is a gentleman—by poetical license."

"Well, what do you fear from him?" asked Armande, quietly.

"I fear that he will fill the void in your imagination."

"Do you think I am waiting on the verge of an abyss?"

"I do!" and Hector's tone attested the sincerity of what he said.

"How delightful!" replied Armande, much in the same tone that a child might speak after receiving a new toy. "But, my dear cousin, if my heart is so empty and so hungry, why don't I fill it with you?"

"With me?" and now it was Hector's turn to be surprised.

"Why not?"

"Look at me," replied Hector, earnestly.

"My exterior answers you. I can not address to a stranger the simplest question, but a smile breaks over his face before he can reply. I excite derision; I know it. Every woman smiles upon me; but if I were to misunderstand her good nature so far as to make love, she would never think I was in earnest. Nature played a practical joke when she made me; for, inside, I am full of sentiment and romance; my dreams are full of heroic devotion, tenderness and passion. I have the soul of a Romeo, with the face of a comic singer. The moment I enter a room, all the mothers make a confidant of me; all the girls give me their little commissions to execute, or their bouquets to hold while they dance with somebody else. It has happened to me, in a crowded ball-room, a lovely creature has stopped me to hold up my chin while she tied the knot of my cravat and settled me generally—morally as well as physically. I'm doomed to be misunderstood; my face is a scoundrel who belies me. It belies——"

Almost unconsciously, Hector had shown to his companion the thorn that had ever rankled

in his side, and his passion at what he considered his wretched "make-up" was suddenly interrupted as he saw Mathilde approaching from the direction of the chateau.

Armande could not resist the inclination to laugh; but she said, after her merriment had subsided a little:

"You do your face an injustice, Hector. It betrays, but it does not belie you. You love Mathilde!"

"Hush!" whispered Hector. "She will hear you!"

"Oh, cousin! you have returned very soon. How very good of you!" said Mathilde, as she went towards Hector, after bidding her mother good-morning.

"I have not started, yet," replied Hector, a little awkwardly, as he thought of how remiss he had been in not starting the moment she had signified her desire to have him do so.

"Not started!" exclaimed Mathilde, in mock anger. "Oh, you horror!"

"I'm off now," said Hector, starting quickly away. "I only wished to admire your new habit."

"You shall admire that, and me, and everything, as long as you like when you get back."

"You shall have the hat in time, do not fear!" cried Hector, from the distance.

"Blue feather!" screamed Mathilde after him.

"What a good fellow he is!" said the countess, reflectively.

"Splendid," assented Mathilde, carelessly.

"How do you like my habit?"

"Charming," replied Armande, thinking more of the young man than of the dress Mathilde was desirous of calling her attention to.

"A tailor cuts a sleeve so much better than a dressmaker," continued the young girl, examining carefully the habit.

"What a devoted husband he would make," said Armande, not hearing Mathilde's last remark.

"I wish he had squeezed my waist a little more, I could have borne it very well," continued Mathilde, thinking only of the dress, and whether it fitted perfectly or not.

"What!" exclaimed Armande, starting up in surprise at Mathilde's words; and then remembering that the young girl had been speaking of her dress and its maker rather than of Hector Placide, she said with a smile: "Forget the tailor, my dear, and tell me do these graces, these charms, produce no effect on the many cavaliers in the hunting-field?"

"Oh, yes," replied Mathilde, indifferently; "they all say kind things, you know, but it sounds as if they had learned them at school."

"Is there no one whom you are particularly interested in?" asked Armande, with an anxious tone in her voice.

Mathilde reflected for a moment, and then, hesitating a little as if her mind was not exactly made up, said:

"Well, I think the baron is the most amusing. He rides well, and his clothes are so nicely cut."

"You have observed the fit of his boot and the cut of his coat, but have you regarded the cut of his heart and the fit of his character?" asked the countess, reproachfully. "Oh, Mathilde, a crowd of women are always to be found gathered around a shop window by the attraction of some fashionable dresses. Those who are tempted to buy one, find, after a few days' wear, that it comes to pieces; it was made up for show and for sale. Such are most of the men we admire in the shop-windows of society. They are not home-made, my dear; there is no wear in them."

As she spoke, Armande clasped Mathilde in her arms as if she would shield her from the troubles and sorrows which everyone must bear without regard to their social or pecuniary position.

"I am content to take the world as it is," replied Mathilde, in a manner which showed that she was perfectly satisfied with herself and all around her. "If my husband comes to pieces, I should set about putting him together again, and improve the occasion to make him fit me. But, my dear mother, you want a world as perfect as yourself. You live in a dream land, because you are romantic."

At this innocent remark Armande started to her feet in anger.

"Who told you that?" she asked, sharply. "Who said so?"

Mathilde was disconcerted. She hardly knew what to say, and in her confusion she said almost the worst thing she could have said under the circumstances.

"Oh! I forget, everybody."

"Your father told you that," said Armande, as she walked away in sorrow as well as anger. Sorrow that Mathilde should have repeated the words to her, and anger that her husband should openly speak of her faults to his daughter; and as she walked swiftly away to some place where she might be alone with her grief, she repeated to herself: "Rodolph turns me into contempt, and she has learned the lesson."

CHAPTER VI.

HALF an hour after the events which we have narrated in our last chapter occurred, the garden was deserted by all save old Lafontaine, the gardener, who was busying himself among the shrubbery.

While he was thus engaged a stranger—a young man of some twenty-nine or thirty years of age—appeared at the gate, and seeing

the gardener, approached him with the remark :

"I hope I am not intruding on these premises. Finding the park-gate open, and no one in the lodge, I ventured in to admire the grounds. Who lives here?"

The Count Rodolph Chandoce," replied the servant, respectfully.

"I know the count by name. He has a charming place."

"The count is pleased that strangers should visit the park. The private gardens alone are reserved."

"Then I will rest here a moment," replied the stranger, seating himself at the table which had been occupied by Armande, while the old servant walked away lest he should annoy the visitor by his labors.

"What a delightful and dignified repose these ancient trees spread over this spot," said the young man, communing with himself. "Ages of wealth and cultivated taste have combined to make this paradise. I should like to see the nymphs that inhabit these sacred groves."

As he spoke, he looked around as if he hoped to see some one ; but instead of being some beautiful person, his eye rested upon Armande's embroidery and book, which lay where she had left them.

"A coronet and two letters. A. C.," he said, as he raised the cambric that he might inspect it more closely. "C stands for Chandoce ; A for Amelie or, perhaps, Athalie," and he pressed the handkerchief to his lips in a rapture of ecstasy at the vision of loveliness his fancy had conjured up.

"Here is a book with a marker in it," he said, as he took up the book. "I wonder where her thoughts have been wandering lately," and as he opened it, he exclaimed : "'Astray,' My book—my work! She has been reading me! See where she has marked the passages! Ah! what delightful communion between our souls! Yes; here she underlines half a page—a page of soaring rapture; and here a sentiment, double-scored, and noted in the margin, 'exquisite!' Ah! that one word is still more so. This girl is romantic. She confesses her heart to me."

Almost overcome by his vanity, he stood for several moments gazing earnestly at the book which Armande had marked, and then, as a sudden thought seized him, he wrote with his pencil across the page :

"I have another life I long to meet,
Without which life my life is incomplete ;
Oh, sweeter self! like me, art thou astray?
Trying with all thy heart to find the way
To mine? Straying, like mine, to find the breast
On which alone can weary heart find rest?"

He had just completed the writing, and was studying the effect of the words, when Hector

Placide came up, having just returned from the errand on which Mathilde had sent him.

As the young man saw Hector, he greeted him by name, at the same time laying the book upon the table in such a manner that Placide did not see it.

If the stranger was surprised at seeing Hector walk up, it was no less a surprise to Hector; for as he saw who it was that was thus an occupant of the table, he uttered an exclamation of anger, as he said :

"George de Lesparre—the devil!"

"Are you a guest here?" asked Lesparre.

"No—yes," answered Hector, hesitatingly, and then, thinking only of the mischief he feared the other's presence might cause, he added : "I thought you were in Syria."

"I have just returned from the East."

"Cured, I hope, of your romance?" said Hector, half inquiringly.

"No, I am still in search of the impossible woman—the ideal of my imagination—the queen of my soul. I have made a tour of the world without finding a woman's heart worthy of mine," and the romantic fool gave vent to a sigh, that to Hector's ears sounded more like the dismal and ill-boding croak of a raven, than an utterance born of disappointed love.

"Keep right on, my dear fellow," said Hector, quickly, thinking he saw an opportunity of ridding himself of an unwelcome guest.

"You will find nothing here, and it is only a waste of time, I assure you. You have not tried to find your ideal in Sweden, have you?"

"No," replied the poet, mournfully.

"Then that's the place!" exclaimed Placide, triumphantly; "you will be sure to find her there; but if you do not, try Lapland; that will take you a year or two."

This did not exactly meet George's views, for he answered enthusiastically, as he glanced at the book upon the table :

"There are no women like our own. 'Tis here I am destined to find a sympathetic soul—one who could share my poetic aspirations."

Hector's exclamation of dismay at this rhapsody was genuine, and he immediately tried another plan to get him away from the chateau before he should see Armande.

"Let us take a walk back to the village," he said. "Where are you stopping?"

"I am waiting for the afternoon train," replied Lesparre. "My luggage is at the station."

"I am delighted to hear it," exclaimed Hector, without trying to disguise the elation he felt at this announcement of early departure. "Come with me and I'll show you around the distant parts of the estate."

"You are stopping at the house," said George, reluctantly following Hector, "and I should like to know the family."

"No, you wouldn't," said Hector, eagerly; "they are 'stuck-up' people, I assure you. You would not like them at all."

"What sort of a person is the count's wife?" asked Lesparre, eagerly.

This was a poser to Hector: but with the view of keeping these two romantic people apart, he resolved to tell a down-right lie as well and unblushingly as possible.

"Well, she is a kind of a—a woman—middle-aged."

"Middle-aged?" queried the author, in evident disappointment.

"When I say that, you must remember that, nowadays, it is very difficult to judge," said Hector, wishing to modify his remark as much as possible.

"I have seen women of thirty—or even older—who were capable of inspiring the most romantic passions," said George, still thinking of the marginal notes he had seen in his book.

Hector was again dismayed. The departure of his friend did not seem so near as it did a few moments previous.

"Let me judge for myself," persisted Lesparre. "Come, Hector, I have particular reasons for desiring to know the young Countess Chandoce."

Hector was in despair. What should he do or say?

He was upon the point of allowing matters to work best they might, when heaven seemed to interfere by showing him a very effectual way out of all the trouble.

As Abraham "lifted up his eyes and saw the ram caught by the horns in the thicket," so did Hector see a very present help in time of trouble in the shape of the old countess, who was bustling around in the hope of finding some of the servants in fault.

"The old woman! Kind heaven, I thank thee!" exclaimed Hector, fervently, and then turning to Lesparre, he said: "Well, old fellow, if you insist on knowing the lady, here she is."

At that moment the old countess stood before them, and the look of George de Lesparre's face was comical in the extreme. His fancy had painted a young and beautiful woman; his friend's words had caused him to believe that she was just in the prime of life, and as he beheld a very old lady, with nothing that was lovable or beautiful about her, his spirits fell to their lowest notch. Could his thoughts have been read just at that time, they would have shown an exclamation something like this:

"Heaven and earth! have I written a love legend to that?"

"Madame," said Hector, who had now recovered all his good nature, and was happy at the idea of the gigantic joke he had upon the

love-sick author, "my friend, M. George de Lesparre, desires to be presented to you, the Countess Chandoce."

"I hope your friend will give us the pleasure of his company to-day," said the countess, in her high and lofty manner.

"A thousand thanks, countess—but, unfortunately, the train," hesitated George, now as anxious to get away as he had been to remain.

"You are not going to run away so soon, are you?" asked Hector, with an amused smile.

The romantic author paid no attention to the remark; but with a look, almost of anguish on his face, he whispered to his smiling friend:

"Do you call that middle-aged? Why, she dates from William the Conqueror."

"Is not that the middle ages?" asked Hector.

Lesparre bowed low to the countess, and walked slowly away, thinking what a fool he had made of himself.

"What a charming young man!" exclaimed the countess, as George walked away.

Delightful!" assented Hector, with one of his inimitable shoulder-shrugs. "I never knew him to be so agreeable before."

"He went away very suddenly."

"Yes," said Hector, trying to keep a sober face upon the matter; "he's very retiring—that's his nature—timid to a painful degree. I wanted him to stay."

At this moment Armande drew near, and Hector taking advantage of her coming, went to find Mathilde, in order to give her the hat he had gotten for her.

Armande seated herself by the table listlessly, and took up the book she had been reading; but the moment she opened it her whole appearance changed.

She saw the lines which had been written there by Lesparre.

CHAPTER VII.

"I have another life I long to meet,
Without which life my life is incomplete.
Oh, sweeter self! like me, art thou astray?
Trying with all thy heart to find the way
To mine? Straying, like mine, to find the breast
On which alone can weary heart find rest?"

THESE were the words which George de Lesparre had written and Armande had read. Dangerous words indeed were they for a young wife to read whose husband did not display for her such evidences of affection as she had every right to expect. Dangerous words were they for her to treasure up in her mind, and think of during the lonely hours she passed while her husband was neglecting her for his horses and dogs.

After reading them, her first thought was of the writer, and she made every effort to ascer-

tain who had been in the garden during her very short absence.

Calling Lafontaine to her, she asked :

"Has there been any stranger here this morning?"

"Yes, madame," replied the servant; "a gentleman was here a moment ago."

"What was he like?"

"A tall, dark, handsome young man——"

"That will do," said his mistress, checking his garrulity, while a flush of mingled indignation and wonder passed over her face. Indignation, that anyone should have dared to write such words to her, and wonder, as to whom the person might be.

The noisy arrival of Major O'Hara and his sister interrupted her thoughts from the dangerous channel into which they were straying, and she went to the chateau to welcome the coming guests.

A few words about Suzanne and Major O'Hara. They represented themselves as brother and sister; she, a tall, almost regal-looking beauty, very foolishly affected a very young and diffident manner, which contrasted very poorly with her commanding presence. The major affected a horsey style. His shirt-studs, sleeve-buttons and watch-chain, each represented some of the trappings of the horse, and his whole appearance shed a sort of stable air, as plainly perceptible, and with as little regard for fitness as a horse sheds his coat. Yet horses were not as much an object of adoration to Major O'Hara as he would have had it believed. A quiet game of cards with an opponent who had plenty of money and very little brains, was really the height of this frank, confiding major's happiness.

Rodolph Chandoce had met Suzanne O'Hara at Paris, and, as usual with men, had fallen in love with her because she flattered him. An invitation to spend a few weeks at his chateau was Chandoce's plan for seeing his charmer without arousing his wife's suspicions, and thus the O'Haras became inmates of the Chandoce chateau.

But country life suited the diffident and childish Suzanne as little as it did the frank, confiding major, and at the expiration of two weeks, they not only announced, but actually took their departure; and, the hunting season being nearly over, Rodolph had only his wife, daughter, mother, and mother-in-law from which to choose his company. Even Hector had left them. He had found that his love was gaining the ascendancy over him, and foreseeing a rebuff, had started for a six months' sojourn in Switzerland, in order that he might forget, or at least, succeed in thinking calmly of Mathilde as the wife of another.

Of course to a man like Rodolph Chandoce, one thing was the natural result of this seclu-

sion. He determined to go to Paris. There he would be enabled to see Suzanne—and she, poor, diffident girl, knew that he would follow her—then he could visit his old acquaintances, and live over again his younger life. But never once did he think that his wife, almost deserted by her own husband, would be exposed to any temptation. He must go in order to make life bearable; his wife must be content wherever he chose to take her.

In Paris, as may be supposed, Armande met the celebrated author, Mr. George de Lesparre, very frequently, and at last he was invited by Rodolph to dine.

At the expiration of six months the author was a daily visitor at the Chandoce Hotel, and already had Armande suffered herself to think of him much oftener than she ought.

Suzanne O'Hara was also numbered among "the dear five hundred," and if Armande was not as cordial towards her as she might have been, Rodolph's warmth more than supplied the deficiency.

A ball was to be given at the embassy, to which Armande had refused to go, and she was seated in her drawing-room with the novel of "Astray" in her hands, while her thoughts were upon the lines which had been written in it by some unknown hand, and the author of the book, when her mother entered.

"Poor Mathilde was dying to go to the ball," said the baroness, as she arranged the folds of her train before the pier-glass. "It is so good of you to confide her to me. What does that curmudgeon, your mother-in-law, say?"

"Oh, she growls, of course," replied Armande, indifferently.

"And your husband?" the baroness' lip curled with positive scorn as she spoke of Rodolph.

"He cares nothing one way or the other, so long as he is not bothered." This with a half sigh which spoke of changed feelings on the part of her who had been a wife only a few years.

"Where is he?" persisted the baroness.

"At his club, I presume," and the tone betokened indifference.

"Pleasant for you."

"Very."

"Sweet institution, a club!" The baroness was fast losing her temper. "In the country, the men devote themselves to the hunting field. In the city, the club swallows them up. What do they suppose we are doing all that time?"

"I am happy—at least, I suppose I ought to be; it is my fault if I expected more."

"Why don't you shake off this blue mood? Emerge into the world of pleasure. Don't mope at home. Imitate your husband. Go out; enjoy yourself."

"I can't," replied Armande, wearily, "I've

tried, and I can't. It all seems so hollow, so contemptible. My life must be devoted to one being, one object. I must pass it on my knees before my idol, without a thought but of him. The horizon of the future must be within his arms, and my only light derived from his love." For a moment the baroness looked at her daughter in perfect amazement, and then with a gesture of impatience, she said:

"What a dreadful bore you must be to a man who thought to wed a commonplace woman, and discovers he has married the Sphinx."

What the answer would have been it is impossible to say, for at this moment the servant announced Mr. Hector Placide.

"The truant has come back!" exclaimed Armande, gleefully, as she arose to welcome Hector, and held out both her hands to him as she would have done to a brother—and he was as dear to her as one. "How glad I am to see you!"

Hector responded to her fervent greeting, and then turned to the baroness, as she said:

"You passed the last six months in Italy?"

In Switzerland," said Hector, betraying ever so much astonishment that they should have had so little interest in his whereabouts.

"Six months—all the winter!" exclaimed the baroness, in much the same tone as if she had not before noticed that the young man had been absent from the city. Were you not dreadfully weary of the place?"

"Yes," was Hector's dry reply. "I was at an establishment where they practised the cold water cure."

"What was your complaint?" and the question was asked with that well-bred indifference as to the answer which is so well affected by many persons that it becomes almost an insult.

"Heart disease," said Hector, promptly, without apparently noticing the tone of the questioner.

The entrance of Mathilde at the moment interrupted the conversation.

Hector gazed on the vision of loveliness which thus suddenly appeared before him, as if the young girl had been a visitor from some other sphere.

But Mathilde very quickly showed that she was of the earth "earthy," for going up to her stepmother, without having seen Hector, she presented herself and her ball-room finery for Armande's approval.

"You do not see Hector," said the young countess, as she greeted Mathilde with a kiss.

Hector advanced as if expecting something approaching a warm reception; but he was mistaken, for, as Mathilde turned and saw the

light of expectation in Hector's eyes, she said in a tone which might have been used had she parted with the young man only the night previous:

"How do you do, cousin? How have you been this age?"

"Thank you," replied Hector, who could not repress the disappointment which he felt, "indefinite people like myself are always about the same."

"I am so glad you have come back," and now Mathilde displayed just a trifle of feeling. "When you are not near me it seems as if something had gone wrong."

Hector's spirits arose at once, and he started eagerly forward as he asked:

"Then you did——"

But Mathilde's manner changed as suddenly as does the sun on an April morning, and Hector stopped, stammered, and finished the sentence with:

"Miss me a little?"

"Awfully—you can't think!" laughed the young girl. "Well, how did you like Sweden?"

"Sweden!" echoed Hector, astonished and pained that she too should have had so little interest in his whereabouts. "How did I like—but I was in Switzerland!"

"I thought you were in Sweden," she replied, carelessly, then turning to her mother she said:

"Well, good-night, mamma;" and, as if to give a little animation to poor Hector's hopes, she said to him:

"Good-night, Cousin Hector. Oh! don't forget to-morrow morning. I have a commission."

"I shall resume my old functions," said Hector, in despair, as Mathilde, accompanied by the baroness, left the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

"I HOPE you intend to spend the evening here?" said Armande to Hector when they were alone.

"I must show myself at the embassy for a few moments."

"And then you will return?" And Armande's tone was one of sincerity.

"Yes," replied Hector, without hesitation. "How is Rodolph?"

"Oh, God-like and supreme! He overlooks me," replied the young wife, in a tone which betrayed, far more than words could have done, how deeply her husband's indifference had wounded her; and then, as if to change the subject, she added:

"How do you get on?"

"I thought that absence and change of scene

had thrown cold water enough on my feelings; but now I am not sure," replied Hector, disconsolately. "I've a good mind to go back again and try another douche."

"Nonsense!" said Armande, kindly; "stay with us."

"In the middle of the infection?" asked Hector, with a comical air of dismay, and then abruptly:

"What's new since I left?"

"Nothing," replied Armande, as if trying to appear unconcerned, and then, as if a sudden thought had flashed upon her, she added:

"Yes, I forgot—yes, we have discovered such a charming person, and one of your friends, too."

Hector started in astonishment. He knew as well as if some one had told him the name of the friend she referred to, but yet he asked:

"Who is it?"

"Mr. George de Lesparre."

"How did you form his acquaintance?"

"I had remarked at the opera and in the park a gentleman who seemed to find himself constantly in my path, fixing his eyes on me in so remarkable but respectful manner that——"

"Exactly," said Hector, dryly, as he interrupted her; "so one day, Rodolph, who had met him somewhere, brought him here."

"Precisely," replied Armande, not a little astonished at Hector's penetration.

"How obliging!" and now there was positive sarcasm in Placide's voice.

"What?" asked Armande, wondering at this new phase in the usually pleasant and cheerful Hector.

"I say how obliging to make thing pleasant for my friend;" and now the countess knew why he spoke as he did.

"Is he so dangerous a personage?" she asked, in astonishment.

"Very, for you."

"Why for me more than another?"

"Because——" then suddenly stopping as if to consider, he added wearily, as if determined no longer to struggle against the fatality which seemed to hover around those two: "No matter—to point out such a danger to a woman is to add another charm to temptation."

"Do you know if he visited our neighborhood in the country while we were there?" asked Armande, without heeding or showing that she heeded the warning contained in the young man's words.

"No; did he say so?" replied Hector, hastily and eagerly.

"No: but I had a strange correspondent, who—but stay; you know his handwriting?"

"Perfectly."

Armande went to a table in one corner of the room, and took from it the novel "Astray,"

which she brought to Placide, with the question:

"Is that it?"

Hector at once recognized the writing; but at the same time he was firmly resolved to lie about it, and do it well; therefore, he answered firmly:

"No, it is not a bit like it."

"I dreamed it was," said Armande, dreamily.

"Has he made love to you?" asked Hector in alarm.

"No."

"But he will?" persisted the young man, earnestly.

"If he does I will tell you," laughed Armande, as she turned at the entrance of old Lafontaine, who announced:

"Miss Suzanne O'Hara."

Hector at once arose to go, and succeeded in reaching the door without encountering this Irish coquette whom he cordially disliked.

"I could not pass the door without calling," said Miss O'Hara, affectionately, to Armande, as she imprinted what might have been a Judas' kiss upon her cheek.

"Are you not going to the Spanish Embassy to-night?" she asked of Armande.

"No," was the rather cool answer, "I rarely go out now; but you will find the baroness and Mathilde there."

"I shall go to the opera first."

"What do they give to-night?"

"'Crispino.' I have never heard it."

For a moment the conversation lagged, and Suzanne toyed with a bouquet which she held in her hand.

"What a charming bouquet you have there," said Armande, noticing it for the first time.

"Let me offer it to you," said Miss O'Hara, eagerly—almost too eagerly a careful observer would have said.

"My dear Suzanne," said Armande, smiling, "you never call without bringing me the most exquisite bouquet; you are as attentive as a lover would be."

"I leave it there to take my place," insisted Suzanne, as she placed the flowers upon the mantel. And as if her mission was now accomplished, she added: "Now I must be off, for my brother is outside on the box of my brougham, and it's snowing."

"Outside, poor fellow!" said Armande, compassionately. "Who is with you in the carriage?"

"No one," answered the sprightly Miss O'Hara, laughing; "but there is only room for me and my skirts, so I put the major on the box. Good-night, love. I do so wish I could remain with you all the evening, it would be so

nice; but I can't. Good-night;" and throwing a kiss from the tips of her delicately-perfumed gloves, Miss O'Hara was gone, and before the door had closed Lafontaine announced another visitor as:

"The Baron de Mount Gosline!"

The baron entered with all the attendant glory of clothes of the latest fashion, curled mustache and perfumed ringlets. The inevitable glasses were at his eyes, and in his hand he carried a bouquet which was the perfection of the florist's art.

It was with the air of one who is extremely bored that Armande greeted him, and with a polite lie said:

"How good of you to take pity on my solitude."

"Ah, countess!" said the baron, overjoyed at the greeting which he had received, "I brought you these flowers—" and at the same time that he presented them to her he noticed the ones which were on the mantel, and he stopped abruptly in his presentation speech to say: "Now that is too bad! Rodolph has taken a most unfair advantage of me."

"In what manner?" asked Armande, considerably surprised at his words.

"When I was ordering this bouquet, he entered the florist's and bought that," explained Mount Gosline, as he pointed at Suzanne's flowers.

"This?" said Armande, taking the bouquet from the mantel, "you are mistaken."

"I am positive I am right," said the baron, after carefully examining the bouquet.

Armande turned to place the flowers where she had taken them from, and an expression of anguish overspread her fair face as she did so.

"Rodolph sends bouquets to Miss O'Hara, and she comes here to present them to me. What can it mean?" she murmured. And then, with a great effort to restrain her emotion, she turned to the baron, and said, in a tone which was intended to be a merry one:

"You are growing quite gallant, baron. This is the third visit you have paid me this week. Are you going to the embassy to-night?"

"No, madame."

"To your club, I suppose?"

"No, madame," replied Mount Gosline, in the "dying-duck" style; "I pass my time chiefly at home."

"At home!" responded Armande, in mock surprise, "I did not think young men had any. What on earth do you do at home?"

"I read Byron and Lamartine," said the fop in an affected tone, as he placed a chair near Armande, and seated himself.

"You astonish me!" laughed the countess, amused at his manner.

"My life has undergone a change," con-

tinued the baron. "I have lost the gayety of youth. I live apart from the world, and solitude is my only companion. The frivolous conversation of the clubs wearies me. I find no one with whom I can sympathize—no one who can indulge with me in melancholy."

"But you have not relinquished the races. I saw your name attached to some horse that lost."

This was the baron's weak point, and he forgot for the moment what he had been saying, and immediately began in an excited manner to discuss the matter, leaving his love-making to follow the events of the turf.

"I lost the Emperor's cup by half a nose," he said. "That old O'Hara squared my boy to pull the mare." Seeing an amused look in Armande's face just at the moment, he recollected himself instantly, and went back to his love-making, with:

"Not that the Emperor's cup could contain a solace for my woe. I'm too far gone."

"You excite my curiosity," said Armande; "what has caused this metamorphosis?"

"Very true," assented the would-be disconsolate lover. "I'm a perfect transformation scene reversed. I have gone from light to darkness." This idea, which was original, was, to his mind, such a happy one, that he could not refrain from repeating it. "I have gone from light to darkness. To borrow the language of Shakespeare, 'The light of other days has faded;' and in my gloom there is only one star—my own, my guiding star! Will that bright orb ever descend from heaven, and shed its beams on me? Will it? Will it?"

"How should I know?" replied Armande, perfectly unconcerned.

Neither she nor the baron were aware of the entrance of the old countess, who had entered quietly, and remained standing near the door.

"You alone can know that star's feelings," continued Mount Gosline, as he half slipped, half twisted himself from his chair, and sank on his knees before Armande, all the time continuing his impassioned appeal in a voice which he considered touching in the last degree. "You alone can speak the music of the spheres. Here on my knees let me await your fiat."

He certainly had not long to wait, for at that moment he caught a glimpse of the old countess, who was approaching him with surprise and anger depicted on every line of her features.

With a muttered exclamation of, "The devil," he commenced industriously to search about the floor as if seeking something, and after a moment of most embarrassing silence, he said:

"I can't see it anywhere. I don't think you could have dropped it."

"Have you lost anything, Armande?" asked the countess, in a severe tone.

"The baron thinks I have," replied Armande, in a tone which conveyed to the discomfited Mount Gosline's ear a stern reproof for his worse than folly: "but he is mistaken. Pray do not trouble yourself further, baron; you will never succeed, I assure you."

"What was it?" asked the countess, sharply.

"A jewel, madame, out of my guard-ring."

With some effort, and a very red face, Mount Gosline arose to his feet, presenting a decidedly sheepish appearance.

"Stooping has made you quite red in the face, Baron," said Armande.

"Yes," hesitated the embarrassed man. "quite so. Stooping makes me giddy."

"No, baron," said Armande, in a low, firm tone which could not be mistaken; "giddiness makes you stoop. You understand me?"

"I—I—think so," and as the baron backed out of the room very much like a cur which had been whipped, he said: "Ladies, I fear I have intruded too long. Good-evening."

CHAPTER IX.

FOR a few moments after the gushing baron had taken his very undignified departure not a word was spoken by either of the ladies.

The old countess broke the silence by the question:

"What is the attraction that young man discovers in this house? There is only one unmarried female here."

Armande could not resist the opportunity for retort, and she answered:

"Two—yourself and Mathilde."

The old lady did not choose to measure lances with her somewhat sarcastic daughter-in-law, and she therefore paid no attention to the remark; but contented herself in saying, in her most vinegary tone:

"If his pretensions point to Mathilde, I have other views for her, and so has her father."

"Indeed! And may I ask on whom you have bestowed Mathilde's affections?"

"The gentleman who aspires to an alliance with my family," and here the old lady drew herself up to her full height, "is now with Rodolph in his study—Mr. George de Lesparre."

"De Lesparre!" exclaimed Armande, starting from the chair in astonishment.

"For some months past, I have observed his admiration for Mathilde," continued the old woman, complacently.

"Indeed!" said Armande, who felt that some answer was necessary, and who had risen from her chair, and was pacing the room in or-

der that she might better conceal her agitation.

"His constant presence in this house must have some object; and perhaps you are not aware that he visited our park six months ago. It was the very morning the O'Haras paid us their first visit."

"George de Lesparre was there!" cried Armande, in great excitement, while her face which was alternately paling and flushing would have told the story, had the old woman not been so firmly convinced that her own version of the affair was the correct one.

"I found him with Hector in the park," replied the countess, looking curiously at her daughter-in-law.

"No!" replied Armande, shortly.

"I can see all that is going on," continued the old woman, with a tone of pride at her own discernment.

"Perhaps you mistake your wishes for those of M. de Lesparre," suggested Armande.

"I'm no fool, my dear," and although the words were sweet, the voice was not.

"Clever people are never fooled except by themselves!" replied Armande, bitterly, and then nothing was said until old Lafontaine entered with a message.

"Mr. George de Lesparre wishes to know if the Countess Armande will receive him?"

"At this hour?" exclaimed Armande, in surprise and agitation.

"The count sent me to inquire," said the servant, apologetically.

"Oblige me, Armande," said the countess, in her hard, metallic voice which always sent a shiver of dread over her daughter-in-law. "I am sure he comes to propose for Mathilde."

"Very well," and Armande's voice was faint and almost irresolute; "say that I shall be pleased to receive him."

As Lafontaine left the room, the old countess arose from her seat, and standing before Armande, said:

"Now, Armande, I will leave you; but if you find the gentleman timid, give him every encouragement to declare himself. Meet him half way, and understand me, it is your husband's ardent wish. Need I say more?"

The old Countess of Chandoce left the room, and Armande was alone with the thought that she was to meet this man alone, by the desire of her husband and his mother, that she was to listen patiently to all he had to say to her.

As George de Lesparre entered the room, he said:

"I fear my visit is somewhat indiscreet at this hour; but the count promised to join me here. We have an engagement this evening at the club."

"What attraction has a club for such a mind as yours?" asked Armande, as she looked admiringly at him.

"Very little, I confess," was the answer, and then to prevent, she knew not what, Armande started the conversation in a different channel, by saying:

"I see that you are about to publish a volume of poems."

"I have taken the liberty of bringing you a copy. Will you accept it?" and he handed her a daintily bound volume.

She took it with a slight inclination of the head, and opened it at the fly-leaf. On it was written:

"To the Countess Armande Chandoce, with the homage of the author."

As she opened the book, George moved away as if to allow her to pass her judgment upon his work before he ventured to address her, and as he did so, he saw the volume of his novel lying on the table. It was the same one in which he had written the lines, and acting upon the impulse, he pressed it to his lips. At that moment, Armande turned her head, and by the aid of the mirror, saw De Lesparre press the volume ardently to his lips. Startled by this evidence of affection, although she had believed it to exist, Armande trembled so violently that the book slipped from her nerveless fingers and fell to the floor.

Turning, De Lesparre could not but understand the meaning of it, and the almost unintelligible excuse did not mend matters any. He resolved to declare his passion for this woman, although she was the wife of another, and that other his friend.

CHAPTER X.

GEORGE DE LESPARRE was not the kind of a man who would hesitate to make love to another's wife, and when the husband whom he would wrong was his friend, that fact added spice to the act.

He prefaced his proposal with the remark:

"I have taken advantage of this occasion to make a parting visit. I leave Paris in a few days."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Armande, with a start of surprise which she vainly tried to suppress.

"But you return shortly?"

"I shall be absent some years," he replied, as he watched her every movement earnestly.

"I go to Japan."

"We heard—that is, it is rumored that you intended to settle down in Paris," said Armande, in a voice that trembled visibly, and she turned away from him that he might not see the increasing pallor of her face. "We hoped that you were about to be married."

"You hoped that?" asked George, in a reproachful tone, as he stepped close beside her.

"I mean, of course—I could not have any personal interest—" and now Armande's confusion was very apparent to the man who was closely observing her. "We shall regret to lose you."

"I shall never marry," and the look he gave her would have warned any other woman to have changed the conversation; but Armande asked just the question De Lesparre expected she would.

"Why not?"

"May I tell you?" and he leaned forward like some serpent who would fascinate his prey before striking.

Armande hesitated, and of course the old adage proved true.

She answered, "Yes; if the reason is one I can persuade you to abandon."

Nearer and nearer did the false friend, and still more false lover approach, until she could feel his heated breath upon her brow, and then he said, with a rapid but distinct utterance:

"If there existed somewhere in the world—say in India, Mexico, Spain—I have traveled far—if there was a woman whose life and soul are so much mingled with mine that it seems as if she was born with me, and I must die when she expires—a woman from whom I hope nothing, ask nothing, whom I have vowed in silence to love forever, and from whom I shall now part, sacrificing all—friends, home and country—to live at the farthest corner of the world with her image. If such a passion filled a heart that knows no change and no deceit, I ask you, madame, if I should be acting like a man of honor to offer that heart to another?"

Armande could only answer:

"No."

"No," repeated De Lesparre after her in a decided tone, and then, as he took his hat from the table, he added: "You have pronounced judgment. It is for me to execute it. Farewell."

Armande started from her seat quickly, and stood before the young man, now firmly convinced of his truth and goodness.

"A few moments ago," she said, "a young man was there at my feet, on his knees. He said, in other words, what you have uttered. I did not choose to understand him, much less to reply to him. But I shall not pretend to misunderstand you, because I believe you to be an honorable man who say what you sincerely feel, and do what you say. You are of good family, with a high and noble career before you. Do not sacrifice that and desert your destiny because you have dreamed a dream. Do not let me reproach myself with having involuntarily a fatal influence on the life of a man whom I

wish to respect, if he will permit me. Forget this foolish resolution to abscond, and let me forget anything you have said which exceeded what the friend of my husband should utter, and his wife should hear. Will you?"

"Madame——" interrupted George, in a voice far different from that in which he had been speaking, for Armande's words were not just what he had expected to hear.

But the young wife would not allow him to evade her question, as she knew he was about to do.

"Tell me that you have enough esteem for me and confidence in yourself to appear, when you next call on me, as a friend; if so, I shall be glad to see you—if not——"

She hesitated, and De Lesparre inquiringly repeated her last words:

"If not?"

For a single moment she remained silent, and then said, as she extended her hand:

"Farewell!"

George took the hand which she offered him, and bending low over it, pressed the impassioned kisses thick and fast upon it.

To Armande's mind the interview was over, but this man of the world had no such idea. He had only opened the game, and he believed he had scored the first point.

He was about to return to the assault when he received a sudden check by the entrance of Hector, who had just returned from the embassy. He tried to appear unconcerned, and hide his vexation, as he exclaimed in a forced and unnatural voice:

"Hector! returned to Paris, eh? I hope you enjoyed your trip?"

"Very much," replied Hector, curtly, as he glanced angrily at the speaker.

"You are looking well," continued George.

"Quite well," this time so curt that it almost amounted to rudeness, and De Lesparre bowed himself out as quickly as possible.

Hector waited a moment as if expecting Armande to speak; but as she did not, he asked:

"Well, did he——"

"Yes," replied Armande, before he could finish the sentence.

"I told you so," and Hector's voice had a ring of triumph in it that his predictions should have been fulfilled so correctly; "and you, what did you reply?"

"I—I don't know," replied Armande, half crying.

"Don't you?" and now the usually good-natured Hector was enraged. "If you don't, I do."

"You know what I said to him?" asked Armande, in surprise.

"I can imagine every d—d stupid word."

"Hector!" This in a tone of reproach from Armande.

"You reasoned with him on the folly of his passion," sneered Hector. "You called it a dream; you told him he had a noble mission in the world; you assured him he would forget you; you offered him your friendship and begged him to call again."

"He declined to accept such a position, and he is going to leave France," sobbed Armande.

"Pooh!" sneered Hector.

"He is going to Japan."

"Pooh! He will wait until he has made up your mind."

"Made up my mind?" asked Armande, in surprise.

"To go with him," said Hector, plainly.

"Good heavens! Hector, are you mad?" cried the countess, in surprise, and some anger.

"No," replied Hector, growing more calm, and speaking with the conviction of a man who knows of what he is talking, "but you will be shortly. I know you will, Armande. You are not one of those women who can descend to duplicity; you will not watch for a convenient moment to escape from your home, covering your face with a double veil, and return calmly to play an ignoble comedy. No; you will take but one step from the highest to the lowest. There will be honesty in your fall, and courage in your shame."

"Hector, you insult me!" cried Armande, indignantly.

"I don't care, if I save you," was the determined reply.

Just then Armande heard her husband's step in the ante-room, and she had time to utter a word of warning before he entered.

"Ah, Hector!" exclaimed Rodolph. "How goes it, old fellow? When did you return to the world?"

"This morning," replied Hector, as he shook the count warmly by the hand.

"I am glad to see you back," and Rodolph's words were sincere. Then looking around the room as if in search of some one, he asked: "Where's De Lesparre?"

"I frightened him away," said Hector, in rather a constrained manner, which caused Rodolph to gaze curiously at him for a moment and then to turn the conversation by saying:

"So you have turned up once more. And what have you been doing with yourself down below there in Switzerland? Corrupting the arcadian inhabitants, eh? Come, confess you have carried off some shepherdess of the Alps."

"You are as bad as ever, Rodolph," said Hector. "You think there is nothing serious in the world—pleasure is your only pursuit."

"And not a bad profession either, if you only succeed at it," laughed the count.

"Do you never reflect that a time must come?"

"Never, and that's the reason the time never comes."

"He is quite incorrigible," Hector said to Armande, with a sigh.

"My dear boy, we must get you married," said Rodolph, half-seriously, and half-laughingly. "Armande, you must look out a wife for him."

"Never!" replied Hector, hastily, with a vehemence that was unusual for him.

"Never marry!" laughed Rodolph. "What a dissolute young dog! Are these the principles you bring back from Switzerland?"

Placide shook his head as he answered:

"They are those I learned in Paris, where marriage seems to demoralize the noblest natures."

The laugh with which Rodolph greeted this remark was both long and loud.

"Armande," he said, turning to his wife, "are you not horrified?"

"You go into society," continued Hector, without noticing his friend's merriment. "Have you no eyes to perceive what is taking place around you?"

"Go on," said the count, as he leaned against the mantel, and took out his watch. "I have just ten minutes to give you. The air of Switzerland has stimulated your moral system."

Hector was determined to speak out what he had in his mind, and he continued:

"Do you not constantly see a young wife, whose charms before marriage consisted in the tenderness and gentleness of her heart, the delicacy of her mind? This reliant, helpless creature comes out of the convent on the arm of a man who has sworn to love and cherish and protect her; her first act is to plunge into a—a—a——"

"A vortex," added Rodolph, as Placide hesitated. "I know the word—vortex of dissipation."

"Where these captivating virtues become so many sources of temptation to the heartless. She is said to belong to the man whose name she bears. You can easily recognize him amidst the crowd around her, for he is the only one who does not admire, who pays her no attention, who affords her no protection—that's the husband."

"Then, there's the other man," interrupted the count. "I see what you are coming to—always present, always attentive, always devoted, adoring and adorable. That is the lover. Society is composed of dozens of such social arrangements. What then?"

"Well," said Hector, while his voice was harsh, but earnest, "when I see this, when I see the husband encouraging the attentions of these lovers, good-humoredly assisting in his own dishonor, leading the wife to the edge of the precipice down which one half of his life must fall with her—a catastrophe he is the only person who does not foresee. Well, I say, if such blindness is the natural growth and effect of wedlock, Heaven defend me from marriage."

In his excitement, Hector began to pace the room with a nervous step, which only excited Rodolph's merriment the more.

"You speak like a book. Hector, the bar regrets you, the pulpit has lost an ornament. There is a vigor in your verbs, and a warmth in your adjectives that is quite exciting. Nevertheless, society will go on exactly as before." Then, turning as if by accident, Rodolph took up the bouquet of flowers, and said carelessly: "What a charming bouquet. Who brought you these lovely flowers, Armande?"

"Guess," and there was a troubled look in Armande's eyes as she spoke the word.

"Let me see," mused Rodolph, "who has been here this evening; Lesparre——" and, as if struck by a sudden thought, he added quickly: "Suzanne O'Hara."

"Yes, it was Suzanne," replied Armande, quietly. "She was here an hour ago."

"You should put it in water;" and then, with a very poorly executed start of surprise as he looked at his watch, Rodolph said: "Why, it's ten o'clock! I must be off."

Armande noticed the attempt at deception, but her voice was very calm as she gently asked:

"Are you going to the club?"

"I think I shall look in at some theater;" and again did he try to affect a manner which was entirely foreign to his thoughts. "Now I think of it, I have not seen 'Crispino.' I'll go to the opera for an hour."

"You are going to the opera?" interrogated Armande, as she arose from her seat, while her face blanched to the whiteness of marble.

"Yes," and Rodolph tried to say it carelessly. Then turning to Hector, he said: "Come to breakfast in the morning, Hector. I shall not see you again, Armande, so good-night. Hector will stop and chat with you."

He started to leave the room, but when he reached the door he stopped and said, good-naturedly:

"By the way, I am leaving you together with all the blind confidence you spoke of just now—eh? Perhaps that fine speech of his was only dust in my eyes. Be careful! I am not

such a fool as I look. I'm looking after you. Oh, you long-faced, puritanical, cunning, sly dog!"

And with a warning shake of the head and a merry laugh, he was gone.

CHAPTER XI.

DURING her husband's joking speech Armande had stood with her back towards him, while, by the rigidity of her form and the color of her face, she resembled a marble statue rather than a warm-hearted woman.

The moment that her husband left the room she could control herself no longer, and wailed, rather than said :

"That bouquet was a signal to appoint him to meet her there to-night!"

Then she sank, almost lifeless, into a chair.

"Ah, that is impossible!" exclaimed Hector, as he rushed toward her to offer his assistance.

"It was!" she shrieked. "I see it all. And they make me, his wife, play this contemptible part between them. Has it come to this?"

She could not weep, for her pride had received too deep a wound to admit of tears.

"Hector, give me a glass of water!" she gasped.

He gave her the cooling draught she craved, and as she drained the glass, he asked :

"Are you better now?"

"Yes," she replied wearily; "my heart does not choke me so much as it did just now. I am better—better."

As if to prove the truth of her assertion, she arose to her feet, steadying and supporting herself by the table. Then, as she rang the bell furiously, she asked :

"Did you come here in a carriage?"

"Yes," replied Hector hesitatingly, for he guessed what would follow. "It is snowing; it is only a common hack."

"So much the better," replied the countess, firmly, while the blue lips shut themselves closely, as if to keep in any moan which the pain at her heart might try to make her utter.

In response to the bell, the servant—Armande's own maid—entered the room.

"Sophie," said her mistress, speaking very rapidly as if fearing her strength would fail her before she had time to finish, "bring me a hat and shawl, select the plainest."

And as the girl was about to leave the room, Armande stopped her with :

"Give me yours; that will do better. Be quick!"

"Good gracious, Armande! what are you going to do?" cried Hector, in amazement.

"I am going to the opera," said Armande, firmly; "into the gallery, then I shall not be recognized. I am going to see with my own

eyes what the world, perhaps, has seen for months past."

"You must not go!" commanded Hector. "You cannot go alone!" he implored.

"You shall go with me."

"Me?" asked Hector, aghast at the idea. "No, I cannot. Think what a position you desire me to accept in this business."

"You must, you shall!" she cried firmly, as she took the bouquet from the mantel and threw it upon the floor with a fury that may only be found in a woman scorned.

Two or three times she paced wildly across the room, impatient at the delay of the girl, who in reality had been absent but an instant, and then she went herself to hurry matters.

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Hector, as he was left alone. "What is to be done? she is right in her suspicions. I know she will discover something terrible, and there will be a devil of a row; and I am in for it."

As his eyes roved anxiously around the room, they rested upon the bouquet which Armande had hurled to the floor, and with the sight came a thought of how the trouble might possibly be averted.

An exclamation of joy escaped him as he picked the bouquet up, and he said to himself :

"That is a happy thought, as Mount Gosline would say."

Then ringing the bell, he wrote these words upon a blank card :

"My wife suspects, she is going disguised to the opera to watch our movements. You had better leave the house when you receive this. RODOLPH."

He had hardly finished writing, short as the note was, when Lafontaine entered.

Hastily folding the card and placing it in the bouquet, where it could be seen readily, he said hurriedly to the servant :

"As you value the welfare and happiness of your mistress, jump into my cab, which you will find waiting below at the door, take this bouquet to the opera, ask for Miss O'Hara's box, and deliver it into her own hands. Do not utter a word to a mortal, nor lose a moment!"

Silently the old man obeyed, and had not Hector actually pushed him out of the room, Armande would have seen his retreating figure as she re-entered.

"I am ready," she said, impatiently.

"Lafontaine tells me my cab has gone away," said Hector, without even blushing at the lie he was telling. "The man left word that he would call at my hotel for his fare."

"No matter," cried Armande, grasping him by the arm; "let us walk!"

"In your thin shoes?" exclaimed Hector, in order to delay their departure as long as possible, that Lafontaine might be more sure

arriving there ahead of them. "You will catch your death of cold."

"Oh! if I could have died of cold I'd have been in my grave a year ago," she said bitterly, at the same time trying to urge Hector along; and then, seeing that he was not disposed to go, she added quickly:

"If you object to accompany me, I shall go alone."

Hector saw that it was useless for him to resist, and he followed her much as the burned child goes to the fire.

Out into the bitter cold of the winter night, while the winds whistled about her and the damp snow chilled her to the very bone, this young wife went to test her husband's fidelity.

CHAPTER XII.

HECTOR'S bold plan in regard to sending the bouquet to Suzanne, and thus preventing Armande from discovering her husband's treachery, succeeded, and thus for a while was the trouble between man and wife arrested. Armande returned home believing that she had wronged her husband, and she resolved at the first opportunity to show George de Lesparre how fruitless his love-making would be.

That opportunity occurred sooner than she thought it would, and in order that we may not weary the reader with uninteresting details, we will pass over the few weeks which followed Armande's almost mad visit to the opera house, and introduce them to a ball which was being given by the Baroness de la Rivonniere to her "dear five hundred friends."

The company had been assembled several hours, when the gentlemen, and more especially Suzanne's reputed brother, Major O'Hara, evinced a desire for a game of cards.

A charming little ante-room, immediately adjoining the ball-room, was at the disposal of those who wished to rest (?) themselves by a game of cards, and it is here that we find the Count Chandoce and Major O'Hara engaged in a game of *ecarte*.

"I hold no cards to-night," exclaimed Rodolph, impatiently, as he played to his partner's lead.

"You will be more fortunate in love," said the major, with a strong Milesian accent.

"Now's your time, my boy. I mark the king."

"And the odd trick, as usual," exclaimed Rodolph, as he played and lost.

Rodolph arose from the table as he uttered these words, and Mount Gosline took his place as O'Hara's adversary.

But whether the fop expected to win or not, he was destined to be beaten, and in a few moments he saw that he was no match for the Irish major.

"You certainly hold splendid cards," said Mount Gosline, after the game had been in progress about ten minutes.

"I do," replied the Irishman, confidently; "honors run in my family. The O'Haras were kings and queens."

"Were there any knaves amongst them, major?" asked Mount Gosline, in a sarcastic tone.

"Ah, you dog! you will have your joke," replied the good-natured major, determined not to take offense at anything.

"But this time I think I beat you."

"Play," and O'Hara's tone was that of a man who is certain that he will win.

Mount Gosline played the king of hearts.

O'Hara trumped.

"You have no heart?" asked Mount Gosline, in astonishment.

"Divil a one," replied the Irishman, as he played his card and called "two odd tricks and game. That was double or quits. Will you try another?"

"No," replied Mount Gosline, dryly, as he arose from his seat. "I only wanted to see the odd trick." Then, as he received the money which had been staked and lost, O'Hara said:

"A thousand thanks! I'll go bail you win at the other little game—the game of love. How does that come in? The beautiful young countess, I mean."

"My dear fellow," said Mount Gosline, in a most patronizing tone, "I never had the smallest weakness in that quarter. No; I respect Rodolph too much. I am an admirer of the daughter."

"To be sure," replied the major, confidently, and as he gave his companion what was intended to be a sly poke in the ribs, he added:

"There's a pot of money in that quarter. See here, now. I've some influence with the count through a person to whom he can deny nothing; but that person is—I'm sorry to say it, sir—but the person I allude to is——"

"Mercenary," interrupted Mount Gosline, "I know she is."

"She?" exclaimed O'Hara, in some surprise.

"I mentioned no names."

"No," and now Mount Gosline's manner was that of a man who, holding the winning cards in his hands, determines to play them: "but you mean your wife."

"Me wife! what's that?" and the major's start of surprise would have done credit to a first-class comedian.

"My dear major," said Hector, now coming forward, "that is the odd trick."

O'Hara turned from one to the other, and surveyed them critically through his eye-glass for a moment before he made a reply. Then, in the most innocent manner possible, he said:

"Upon me conscience, gentlemen, I'm at a loss to know what you mean."

"Allow me to explain," said Hector, approaching more closely. "I could not induce the baron to believe what I learned from the police, that a card-sharper by the name of Hennessy had found his way into good society by the means of the beauty of a female accomplice whom he passed off as his sister, so I asked the baron to sit down to *ecarte* with you while we watched your game."

"Is it me you mane?" exclaimed O'Hara, indignantly. "An O'Hara, and a major in the British army?"

"Sergeant major?" interrupted Hector, sarcastically.

"Gentlemen, d'ye mane to provoke me now?" And the Irishman was becoming excited.

"Not at all," replied Hector, as he placed his hand on O'Hara's arm, while Mount Gosline did the same. "You know that I have been absent from Paris for three week. Allow me to give you an account of my travels. First, I went at the suggestion of the police to Wiesbaden, to make some inquiries."

"Where the devil is Weisbaden?" interrupted the major.

"It is a charming town in Germany, where they play a nice little game called roulette, and where a kind of wild fowl called Patrick Hennessy once flourished. Do you know such a person?"

"Hennessy—Hennessy?" repeated O'Hara, as if the name sounded familiar to him. "To be sure I've met that name somewhere."

"Perhaps on a brandy bottle," suggested Hector, with a laugh in which all joined.

"Well," continued Placide, "I marked down this bird, followed him from roost to roost. He began life as a banker's clerk in Mullengar, speculated and borrowed of the till; then he enlisted in the rifles, and arose to be non-commissioned officer, deserted with some regimental funds, and turned up next in Vienna, as courier to Prince Kotzikoff."

During Hector's recital, O'Hara's face was a study. Try all he would, he could not prevent the flush which would overspread his face at each incident in his life which was being repeated so accurately. But at last he succeeded in appearing unconcerned, and answered with a careless laugh:

"Ha-ha, ye devils! I see what ye are at. This is a bet. You have got a bet between you to mystify me. Go on now—I'm a quail to the pair o' ye."

"This Hennessy next appeared at Baden as a *croupier*."

"A which?" asked O'Hara, as if the name was one he had never heard before.

"A *croupier*," repeated Hector.

"What the divil is a *croupier*?"

Hector did not attempt to explain what he knew O'Hara to be so familiar with, and continued:

"There he met a lady in whom he perceived those beautiful affinities which enabled him to recognize a confederate—her name was Suzanne. The pair agreed to pass themselves as brother and sister, to play more readily into each other's hands."

"D'ye see the game?" laughed Mount Gosline, as he gave the Irishman a gentle poke in the ribs, and at the same time thinking how nicely they had fixed the counterfeit major.

"No; I don't see it," was O'Hara's angry reply.

"Suzanne was decoy-duck," said Hector, "and when her beauty had enticed the wild birds into the toils, she held them tight with her pretty arm around their necks, while Pat plucked them and feathered the family nest."

"What do you think of that?" asked Mount Gosline, again.

Now was the Irishman's passion aroused, and wrenching his arms from his companions' grasp, he stepped back a few paces, and said, while he eyed the two men closely, with an accent that could not be misunderstood:

"Well, if I had been in Pat's place, I'd have commenced such business with ball practice till I could turn the ace of spades into a nine at twenty-one paces; or tossing a Napoleon in the air, could with a snap-shot bring it down a wedding-ring."

"The devil!" ejaculated Mount Gosline, as he stepped back quickly. This was a phase of the affair that he had not anticipated.

"I'd have employed my tender youth," continued O'Hara, "in practicing with the sword till I was as quick and deadly as forked lightning, and as unapproachable as the north pole; then, if I found any gentleman, or even a pair of them, that raised a question about my antecedents, I could give them in Spain—lead or steel—a good account."

It was now O'Hara's turn to laugh, and he did most heartily, being joined by Hector and Mount Gosline with a very sickly smile.

The matter was taking a very different turn from what they had expected, and they hardly cared to push it further.

"I say," whispered Mount Gosline to Hector, "if I were you, I'd take no notice of anything such a fellow said."

"He addressed you," answered Hector, in the same low tone.

"Of course, but I could not take it up, I don't belong to the family," and Mount Gosline spoke as though he had settled the matter, so far as he was concerned.

With a slight bow to the Irishman, the two

men sauntered into the conservatory, leaving O'Hara to his triumph.

CHAPTER XIII.

ALTHOUGH O'Hara had, for the moment, the best of those who were trying to expose him, he did not feel at all comfortable, and when Armande and Suzanne entered from the ball-room, he found the opportunity to whisper to the latter:

"We must be off! There's a couple of blackguards here throwing stones in our swim, and disturbing the fishes."

"My dear Pat," said Suzanne, decidedly, "you may go, but I shall remain. I have a world of things to do. I am sitting for my likeness to Giraud, and shall be exposed at the academy next spring."

"I'll be exposed in the papers next week," answered the major, with a wry face.

"My dressmaker has just taken my measure," insisted Suzanne.

"The police have taken mine," added O'Hara.

This little by-play was disturbed by Armande, who proposed to Miss O'Hara that they return to the ball-room.

The major hardly caring to enter with them, for fear that Hector's account of his early life had been made public, walked into the conservatory just at the moment George De Lesparre entered the ante-room.

Hector, standing under the shrubbery where he could see all that took place in the room, noticed that Armande made a signal to De Lesparre, and he resolved to prevent, if possible, any secret meeting between the two.

De Lesparre seated himself at the table, and as he did so, Armande turned with an air of vexation, and said, as she held her hand out to De Lesparre:

"My bracelet comes unclasped; the spring must be broken. Can you fasten it for me?"

Then moving nearer the door, Hector heard her whisper:

"Meet me here in five minutes. Contrive that I shall see you alone." And taking Suzanne's arm, the two entered the ball-room again.

Hector came in from the conservatory, and seated himself a short distance from where De Lesparre was carelessly turning the cards.

It was nearly time for Armande to return. Not a word had been spoken by either of the men, and Hector evinced no intention of leaving the room.

"Are you not going into the ball-room?" asked De Lesparre, after a few moments of profound silence.

"No!" replied Hector, curtly.

"Ah! you prefer to remain in the conservatory?"

"Yes—like a flower."

George was in despair. He must get Hector out of the room, but how to do it he could not tell.

After a very awkward silence, he arose, and looking into the ball-room, said:

"I assure you that the room is splendid. Really, it is worth looking at. I never saw so many lovely women gathered in one assemblage. Do go and judge!"

"There are men there, too, I suppose?" said Hector, without rising from his seat.

"Of course."

"I'll not go, then. I hate men—especially dancing men—with their horrible black coats with tails, like so many black bugs amongst the ladies."

"Shall we smoke a cigar in the garden?" asked De Lesparre, now almost exasperated.

"No, you don't!" said Hector, knowing that George only wanted to get him out long enough to give him the slip, and return to the room.

De Lesparre was about to make one more attempt, when Mathilde entered the room.

At first she did not see Hector, but went up to De Lesparre saying:

"Where is he?—I beg pardon, M. De Lesparre, but have you seen—" then noticing Hector, she exclaimed: "Ah, Hector, my dear cousin, how glad I am you are back again! I want you to do me a favor."

"I shall only be too happy," replied Hector, good-naturedly; but his face belied his words. He feared that she would ask of him something which would necessitate his leaving the room, and that he was opposed to doing.

"I was engaged for this quadrille," said Mathilde, "and my partner has evidently forgotten me, and I'm sitting out."

"Who is the monster?"

"The baron. You see that I can't lose the dance, and I shall have to make you do."

"Me! I'll do!" exclaimed Hector, in surprise.

"Yes, give me your arm."

"But I assure you, I don't know the figure," objected Hector, earnestly. "I shall only be laughed at."

"Figure or no figure," said Mathilde, pettishly, "I can't sit on my chair like a wall flower. Don't be ill-natured and selfish, Hector."

This was more than Placide could bear. The girl he loved accused him of being ill-natured and selfish, and though De Lesparre had a thousand engagements with Armande, he would not throw away his chance of happiness to prevent it. Therefore he offered her his arm, and went towards the ball-room, although it was not with a very good grace that he did so.

He had just reached the door, and was men-

tally cursing the cruel fate which obliged him to give De Lesparre the opportunity he was so anxious for, when the baron met them at the door.

"A thousand pardons, Ma'm'zelle! I have been searching for you for an hour," he said, as he offered his arm.

Hector experienced a great relief when Mathilde said to him:

"Many thanks, cousin; you see I don't want you now, it was so good of you to offer," and the next instant the light-hearted girl was in the ball-room.

George was now in despair again, and Hector triumphant.

But their feelings were very quickly reversed when the baroness entered the room and said to Hector:

"You are so good-natured, Hector, that I know you will do me a favor."

"With pleasure," replied Hector.

"Will you dance this quadrille with me?"

"My dear madame, I don't know the figure," expostulated Hector.

"I'll push you through," replied the baroness, taking his arm before he could say another word, and as a foretaste of what her "pushing through" would be, she pulled him through the doorway, and fairly forced him into the position she wished him to occupy.

Thus was the way paved for the meeting between Armande and De Lesparre, and despite Armande's most decided resolutions was that meeting to work incalculable wrong to all concerned.

CHAPTER XIV.

AFTER Hector and the baroness left the room De Lesparre had not long to wait for Armande's coming.

De Lesparre believed that the meeting was appointed in order that he might once more declare his love, but such was not the case. Armande, believing that she had wronged her husband in regard to Suzanne, was anxious to atone in some manner for the thoughts of wrong she had had against him, and she believed that she should begin by showing to De Lesparre how vain his love for her was.

And it was to that end that she spoke as soon as she entered the room.

"M. De Lesparre," she spoke, quickly, "was I wrong to place you in my esteem as highly as I have done? Was I wrong to believe you sincere, honest and noble?"

De Lesparre was astonished at the tone which Armande used.

"What have I done," he asked, "to bring these cold reproaches to your lips? Have I brought trouble to your home, or remorse to your breast? Heaven knows I have not! You bade me approach you as a friend—I have done so."

"Then I was wrong," said Armande, sadly, "and I cheated my own conscience and played the fool with duties which are sacred—I trifled with your feelings until I wounded my own."

"What do you wish me to do?" asked De Lesparre, and his voice was broken as if with anguish.

"Leave this house—my mother's house—at once. Leave Paris to-morrow."

"Madame—" began George, in a reproachful tone.

"For my sake," interrupted Armande.

"I obey," he replied, as he caught her outstretched hand and pressed it passionately to his lips.

"Thank heaven, there's an end to that!" said Armande fervently, as De Lesparre left her.

For several moments she stood in deep and, perhaps, bitter thought, which was interrupted by the entrance of Hector, who, as soon as the dance was concluded, had hurried back in order that he might be in time to prevent any love-making between his friend and the countess.

"You are alone," he said, in surprise, as he entered; "how pale you are!"

"Yes," replied Armande, in a voice that trembled; "he has gone."

"That's well," said Hector, with a sigh of relief. "Now I feel comfortable. I felt a sense of—"

"Of oppression," interpolated Armande.

"Just what I mean," replied Hector, hardly knowing what he said. "You have done the right thing, my poor Armande; listen to me. I wish you knew this man as I do, you could not care for him. You were captivated with an illusion of your own imagination—not a bit like that fellow—he is not all your own fancy painted him—he's neither lovely nor divine."

"No," replied Armande, "I know it. If I encouraged his attention, it was more for spite—from wounded vanity; for I did, Hector; I encouraged a foolish infatuation."

"A doll to nurse," replied Hector, sagely; "a brainless doll, a thing of wax and sawdust, just like these men."

"But my folly has done me good," continued Armande. "It has rendered me repentant toward my husband, whom I have wronged. A few kind words from him will support me—and Mathilde, too, I have neglected her. I see my wrongs, and will address myself to repair them; that will give me courage."

"What an angel you are!" exclaimed Hector.

"There's my mother-in-law," said Armande, as the countess entered the room stiff and prim. "I'll begin with her."

"If you can repair her," said Hector, with a grimace and shrug of the shoulders, "the rest will come very easy," and he left the room.

Filled with her newly-born resolution, Armande went and, kneeling down by the side of the countess, said, in a voice full of sympathy:

"My dearest mother, how fatigued you must be!"

For a moment the old countess looked at her daughter-in-law in astonishment and then in a hard, sharp voice, replied:

"Yes, I am. I hope this will be the last mob of this kind I shall find myself mixed up with."

"How glad I shall be to get back to the dear old house at home!" said Armande, determined not to be disheartened at the first rebuff. "Indeed I will try to make you happy there, and devote myself—"

"We shall see," interrupted the old woman, in much the same tone which she would have used had she accused Armande of telling a falsehood. "Where is M. De Lesparre?"

This was more than Armande could bear, and rising from her humble position she said, as she moved haughtily to the other side of the room:

"He was here a few moments ago."

"You were speaking with him?"

"Yes."

"He has relinquished all idea of marrying Mathilde?" said the old lady, sharply.

"I really do not know," replied Armande, in no little confusion. "I mean—I think—I suppose—"

"Ah, well?" interrupted the countess, in a tone of virtuous indignation; "perhaps you have your own reasons for opposing my wishes."

"My own reasons!" exclaimed Armande, with astonishment; "I do not understand."

"I should be glad to think you did not," replied the old lady, icily.

Armande's heart was wounded by the insinuation, and she could not repress the cry of pain which those cruel words wrung from her.

"Ah, mother—mother!" she cried; "if you knew how cruel you are at this moment, you would speak more kindly to one who needs your sympathy!"

"Sympathy!" exclaimed the countess, in the utmost derision. "I know this, that you have not learned in novels the duty of a wife nor the circumspection of a woman of rank, and you fail to bear my son's name before the world as I have bequeathed it to you. I am not blind."

"Oh! for one kind word!" cried Armande, from out the anguish of her wounded heart. "Where can my heart find shelter?"

As if in answer to her question Mathilde entered

the room in order to get a glass of water. As soon as she had quenched her thirst she turned to go, but the countess detained her.

"Mathilde, do not leave me—give me a few moments!" she pleaded.

"I shall lose my place if I stop," said the young girl, thoughtlessly.

"Tell me that you love me!" insisted Armande, eager for one cheering word.

"Of course I do," said Mathilde, eager to return to the scene of her triumphs. "But what nonsense you are indulging in."

"No, no!" replied Armande, unsatisfied with Mathilde's careless answer. "Speak it from your heart—if you have one."

"My dear mother, you are nervous to-night," she replied. And seeing her father just then, she beckoned him toward her and said: "Oh, papa! come and take care of her. She is quite hysterical. It is the weather."

"What is the matter?" and Rodolph's voice was not unkind, yet it was devoid of that tone which tells so plainly of the love which every woman so hungers after.

"It is nothing," said Armande, forcing herself to be gay. "I never felt better, or more happy."

As she spoke she took his arm with a pretty, confiding air, and looked up into his face that he might see the love-light in her eyes.

"Your voice has changed," said Rodolph, tenderly. "How long since I have seen such a smile upon your lips!"

"Then I'll keep it there, if it pleases you," she said, tenderly and lovingly.

Then indeed would the reconciliation have been complete, and the two persons who should have been all in all to each other would have been happy in renewing their vows of love; but it was not to be—or at least not then, for before Rodolph could speak the baroness entered the room, as if out of breath, and said quickly:

"Ah! Rodolph, I lost you in the darkness. What have you done with Mathilde?"

"With Mathilde?" echoed Chandoce, in perfect amazement.

"Yes," replied Armande's mother; "she was with you a few minutes ago in the garden. I recognized her *burnous*, white with red stripes. I gave it to her. I caught sight of you in the distance; you had your arm around her."

For a moment Rodolph was completely at a loss for words, and then he replied, in a hesitating manner:

"Oh, true—I forgot—to be sure! Yes, I did take Mathilde for a turn around the lawn—what was I thinking of? Then—then I brought her back to the ballroom."

As he spoke he stepped to the door, looked in at the dancers, and added, quickly:

"See! there she is, dancing with Hector."

At this moment Suzanne O'Hara entered the room from the conservatory while Rodolph's back was turned.

The count did not see her, but Armande saw, and the sight seemed to pierce her very heart, that Suzanne wore a white *burnous* with red stripes.

It was she, then, instead of Mathilde, with whom Rodolph had been walking with his arm around her waist.

Rodolph turned to his wife and said:

"Go on, Armande: your mother interrupted a most loving avowal. What were you saying?"

But Armande stood like some statue, with her hand pointed in the direction where Suzanne stood.

"Look!" she almost hissed.

Rodolph turned, and understood the situation at once.

CHAPTER XV.

It was the entrance of Suzanne O'Hara which had caused Armande's exclamation.

Rodolph broke the silence which followed Suzanne's entrance.

"Armande," he said, "I—I assure you—"

But his wife would not allow him to proceed.

With all the fury of a woman scorned she walked past him and confronted the woman who had robbed her of a husband's love.

"Oh, 'tis you, mademoiselle," said Armande, "I really mistook you for Mathilde. This cloak—"

"Oh, yes," interrupted Suzanne, quite innocently. "It is here."

"Indeed," said the young wife, sarcastically.

"She was kind enough to lend it to me," continued Suzanne glibly, "as I was going to take a walk in the garden, the rooms are so stifling."

"Miss O'Hara," said Rodolph, who had not quite recovered his presence of mind, "will you pardon me if I ask you to leave us? The countess is not well."

With an inquiring look at the count, Suzanne left the room, and Rodolph said to Armande:

"You are under a false impression, which I can explain away when you are calm."

"God knows I'm calm," said Armande, as she faced her husband, "for despair is always so. This is but the last drop that overflows my cup of misery. Can you explain away the last five years? Outraged by your indifference, by your contempt, I have seen you trample your faith, your honor, all under foot; for five years you have treated me as a piece of furniture in your house, a thing embroidered with your initials and your coronet; and when now you bruise my woman's heart and crush my pride, I can not suppress a cry of indignation, you fling me an excuse—a lie!"

"Armande!" exclaimed Rodolph, but his wife would not listen.

"Oh! you have applied the torture," she said, passionately, "and you have got the truth. Let us throw off the mask, for to wear it longer stifles me."

"You want the truth?" exclaimed Rodolph, calling anger to his aid, as is very often the way of man when he knows he is in the wrong. "You shall have it, then. Think of the present what you please; I shall neither excuse nor palliate it; its excuse and palliation is the past. For five years you have indulged your mania for sympathies by posing before the world as a victim, as a suffering wife. You taught our friends to regard you as an angel from heaven," and here Rodolph's voice grew ironical, "whose devotion and delicacy my gross and vulgar soul was incapable of appreciating. That irresistible craving for compassion induced you to seek it in your servants; no tribute was too poor. Armande, you ceased to be a wife the moment you carried your wrongs into your neighbor's house; then you lost the right to reproach me."

"I have at least the right not to return to your house, where my dignity as a woman is insulted by the infamy of which I am made the contemptible instrument," replied Armande, bitterly. "I shall remain here under the protection of my mother."

"You talk nonsense," said Rodolph, without an accent either of anger or love in his voice; "you will do nothing of the kind; you will not raise any such scandal, to provoke commiseration at my expense; you cannot do as you please, because I am your husband; and you must do as I think right—and I shall not permit you to be a fool."

Armande started to her feet, and confronting him, said, in a voice that trembled with rage:

"And if I compel you?"

"And has it come to threats?" said Rodolph, contemptuously. "Compel me? My dear child, you do not know what you are talking about."

And turning away in a cool, indifferent manner, Rodolph, Count Chandoce, left the room.

Then did Armande's passion give way to grief, and throwing herself into a chair, she laid her head upon the table and wept violently.

During the interview between Armande and her husband, George de Lesparre had been in the conservatory where he could hear and see all that

passed. This was the opportunity he had been seeking.

Noiselessly he entered the room, and like the serpent in the garden, approached his prey with cat-like steps until he stood close by her side.

"Armande!" he whispered.

The countess looked up wildly at hearing the voice, and recognizing the intruder, she started as if confronted by some demon.

"Ah!—you—you here! Leave me—leave me! I tell you I am mad—go! You are faithless, too, for your presence here is a perjury!"

"No, Armande," entreated De Lesparre, using her Christian name for the first time, "I was leaving the grounds when I heard your voice—you were in tears, and I could not stir."

"Leave me, sir, I implore you," begged Armande to him in such piteous tones, that had he possessed any portion of that love he professed, he would have killed himself had she commanded.

"You ask me to restore and respect the peace of your life," said George, sneeringly. "Is this it? I may not be able to restore them, but I can offer you the consolation of infinite tenderness, and mingle my tears with yours. Do not refuse the heart that lies under your feet!"

"I can give you no share of my sorrow, without accepting a share of your guilty love," said Armande, as if she needed this reminder to keep her from opening her heart to this man who professed to love her so tenderly. "Oh! to listen to you here in my mother's house, is in itself a crime. Do you know what you ask me? No, you cannot, you would not tempt me in a moment of exasperation with the word revenge. Oh, I tell you."

At this moment, as if sent by some evil agent, Rodolph entered the room unobserved and heard De Lesparre say:

"Armande, I heard all that passed between you both. I heard his bitter taunts, and your proud resolve to vindicate your outraged honor."

Then Rodolph saw George reach forward and clasp Armande's hand in his despite her resistance, and he heard his wife say:

"M. De Lesparre, I implore you to leave me; I do not know what I do."

"Armande, I love you," was De Lesparre's fervent avowal, and then Rodolph could wait no longer.

Seizing Armande roughly by the arm, he said, as he almost flung her toward the door:

"Go into the ball-room!" and then turning to De Lesparre, who was standing with averted head like the guilty, base wretch that he was, he said:

"A word with you, sir."

CHAPTER XVI.

For several moments the two men looked full into each other's faces.

Rodolph broke the silence by saying:

"Words between us are not necessary."

"No."

"But you will understand that my wife's name must not appear in the matter; another pretext must be found," and Rodolph's voice trembled with the intensity of his passion.

"Any you please to dictate," said De Lesparre, indifferently.

"Sit there!" and Count Chandoce pointed to a chair by the table.

Many times did he pace back and forth the small room, as if seeking to gain control over the anger which suffused his face, and caused his heart to throb as if it would burst its confines. At last he stepped to the table at which De Lesparre was seated, and taking a pack of cards that laid there, said, in much the same tone that he would use in speaking to his servants:

"You understand what is going to occur?"

"Yes."

"Deal those cards."

Then Rodolph went to the door, and calling a servant, sent him for Hector and Mount Gosline, who

came almost immediately after being summoned, and found the Count Chandoce seated opposite De Lesparre at the table.

"Have you a thousand francs to lend me?" asked Rodolph of Hector.

"With pleasure," said Hector, as he produced the money. "Are you losing?"

"De Lesparre's luck is wonderful," said Rodolph, with an effort to appear calm. Then throwing some money on the table, he said to George:

"Fifteen hundred francs on this game!"

"As you please," replied De Lesparre, coldly.

"Rodolph," expostulated Hector, as he saw his friend make a false play, "you are mad to play like that; no wonder you lose."

Count Chandoce took no heed of his friend's advice, but continued to play recklessly.

While they were so engaged, several of the guests, headed by O'Hara, entered the room.

The opponents were just commencing a new game.

"We will make it double or quits; three thousand," said Rodolph.

De Lesparre bowed. What the stakes were did not affect him, since the ultimate result was to be bloodshed.

The game was played, and De Lesparre won.

"Lost again!" exclaimed Rodolph. "That is two thousand I owe you," he said, thinking that the time had come to begin to quarrel.

"Three," said De Lesparre, quietly.

"I say it was two!" exclaimed the count, angrily.

"Three! I'll be on my oath it was three," interposed O'Hara, who loved to see fair play—when any one else was playing.

Rodolph was forced to admit that it was three, or involve himself in a quarrel with his victim.

"Deal!" he said hoarsely, as he pushed the cards over to his opponent.

Anxious to turn an honest penny, the gallant Major O'Hara proposed to back the dealer ten napoleons, and Mount Gosline accepted the wager.

"I'll take ten to one, he'll turn the king," continued the major.

"Seven to one is the odds," said Mount Gosline; "I'll give you eight, however."

"Done, for the love o' sport!" exclaimed O'Hara; and De Lesparre turned the trump card, which proved to be a king.

Now was Rodolph's time, and he took immediate advantage of it.

"Stop!" he cried, angrily, as he arose from the table. "Your luck, sir, no longer surprises me!"

An exclamation of astonishment burst from all.

"Where did you learn that trick?" asked Rodolph, contemptuously.

"What do you mean?" asked Mount Gosline, as he also arose from his chair and confronted Chandoce.

"Play the hand out," suggested O'Hara, who was anxious to win the rest of the money he had staked on the game.

"'Tis useless," exclaimed Rodolph; "the cards are marked. This man is a blackleg!"

Instantly all was confusion. Those around the table attempted to calm Rodolph, and prevent the quarrel which was pending, and several of the more hasty and long-tongued rushed into the ball-room to tell of the disturbance.

Of course, many of the guests from the ball-room crowded to where the card party were, and foremost among them were the baroness and Armande.

The countess at once understood what had happened, and the cause of it, for she exclaimed:

"Rodolph, what have you done!" and seeing the look of determination upon her husband's face, she sunk upon her knees, and holding out her hands imploringly, cried: "Oh! for my sake—no—" And then, happily for her, her strength failed, and she fainted.

Just then Mathilde entered, without having heard

anything of the trouble, and pushing her way through the wondering crowd, she cried:

"What is the matter, Armande?" and then she saw the countess lying where she had fallen. "Oh, papa!" cried the young girl, turning toward the count. "What has happened?"

She received no answer, but her womanly instincts prompting her, she sunk upon her knees by the side of her mother, and raising her lifeless head tenderly, exclaimed:

"She has fainted! Some one bring some water, quick!"

"Gentlemen," said Rodolph, to Hector and Mount Gosline, while his face expressed infinite tenderness for his daughter, "I beg of you not to let my daughter hear one word of what has happened."

There was little need of this caution, for the Countess Chandoce's carriage was immediately called, and Mathilde assisted in placing her mother in it, holding her head tenderly during the drive, while Hector rode on the box.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHEN Armande awoke to consciousness in her own room her mental sufferings were terrible. Well did she know why the quarrel arose, and what would be the ending of it.

Finally, just as the pale, cold dawn crept in at her window, she, exhausted and terror-stricken, knelt at her reading-desk, and there prayed that that night's work might not be accounted against her.

While she was thus engaged, Rodolph entered. He was cold, stern and determined. As he saw how she was engaged he said, while a cold sneer wreathed his finely cut lips:

"I am glad to find you in that position, madame. It indicates remorse, if not repentance."

"It is my nightly habit, sir, though you may forget it."

"Insensible and defiant to the last," thought Rodolph. And then he said coldly to the woman before him: "I will tell you, briefly, my business here."

"I know it!" exclaimed Armande, impetuously, as she turned a tear-stained face to her husband. "You come to lean over the precipice into which you have flung a wretched, thoughtless creature. You come to the wreck you have made, and listen to her agony. I know—I know."

For a moment, and a moment only, was Rodolph touched by her evident agony, then he was hard and cold again.

"I do not accuse you," he said. "You will tell me that my voice is the last voice in this world that should be raised against you. You see, I do not speak in anger; the time for that is past. Listen, then, calmly to me. Listen with your heart, if you can." He paused for a moment, and then drawing up a chair, said:

"Sit down."

She obeyed like one who, having no will of their own, instinctively obeys any command which is given them.

After a painful pause Rodolph broke the silence:

"For once in our lives, let us speak gently and kindly to each other; it may be for the last time," and as he looked at his watch, he added: "In an hour I meet M. De Lesparre."

Armande could not repress a cry of anguish as she heard this.

"I ask you to be calm," he said. "That man has taken the place of your many friends to whom you confided your wrongs. This is the natural consequence of my faults and your weakness. You began by indulging in what you thought was the innocent excitement of sympathy, as the drunkard takes at first to wine; but as he comes inevitably to the deadly ardent spirit that brings delirium and death, so, when you found the compassion of your female

acquaintance had lost its effects, you sought the intoxication of a guilty love—"

"No!—no!" exclaimed Armande, passionately.

"You gave him a place, madame," he continued, in the same metallic voice, "that no man should occupy but one. Which of us shall do so, this morning will decide. Enough of this. I came here to explain your position, not my own. The world will continue to be ignorant of the cause of this affair, to save the honor of my name, my daughter's and yours. You understand me?"

Armande turned her head; she could not trust herself to speak.

"Should I survive," continued Rodolph, but now his voice had lost some of its hardness, "I wish that until Mathilde is married, we should continue to live under the same roof, but as strangers to each other. When she leaves my house, I shall go abroad. You may ascribe my absence to any motive you please; I shall never trouble your life again. Do you accept this arrangement?"

"Yes, sir, if you desire it should be so," faltered Armande.

"Good; now there is the other alternative. If I fail—"

Again was the heart of the woman wounded beyond her control, and as a man who receives the lead or steel in his heart, so she started up with more of a convulsive movement of the muscles than by her own volition.

"Sit down!" again commanded Rodolph, and again she almost unconsciously obeyed. "Be calm—you see I am so," he continued. "In this case, I leave behind me one dear charge—my daughter," and here his voice faltered. The suffering of his wife whom he had cruelly wronged had not affected him, but the thought that his daughter might be left without him, unnerved him.

"If I leave a will removing her from your care," continued Rodolph more coldly, "the world may suspect the reason, and discover a secret I desire should be buried in your bosom and in my grave."

"Rodolph!" cried Armande, in her anguish.

"If I heard rightly the few words you addressed to that man—if I understood his reply you can look that child in the face without a guilty blush?"

Rodolph's remark was a question, and for reply, Armande stood before him, and looked into his eyes as if to allow him to search her very soul.

For several moments Rodolph gazed steadily at her, and then replied, as if relieved:

"That is well. There is my will," and he handed her a paper he had taken from his pocket. "I leave her to you; all I ask is that you will treat her with tenderness, and respect the love you will find in her heart for me. Do you think it is a reproach to you that something should regret me? Do not check the prayer nor chide the tears she may offer to my memory. You promise me?"

"Oh, I do!" cried Armande starting toward him with outstretched arms. "Can you doubt?"

"No!" replied Rodolph, coldly, as he pushed aside the arms that would have entwined themselves about his neck. "I believe you—that is all I had to say—now I leave you," and he went toward the door, without one word of forgiveness to the woman who was hungering for it, although she had done nothing for which she might ask forgiveness.

For a moment Armande stood motionless where her husband had left her, and then with a low wailing cry, she moaned:

"Rodolph!"

The man turned as he heard her cry, and said unfeelingly:

"What do you want?"

"Nothing—no matter," she said, vainly trying to repress the sobs.

Rodolph left the room, and as the door closed behind him, Armande swayed back and forth like a broken reed for a moment, and then staggering a few paces toward the door, fell an inert mass upon the velvet lilies and roses of the carpet.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE Bois de Boulogne in the gray, uncertain light of early dawn is anything but a pleasant place of meeting, even when the purpose of parties visiting it are the most amicable; but when it is chosen as the theater of a duel; then does the gloomy wood put on a ghostly somber aspect.

Less than an hour from the time the events occurred which we have narrated in our last chapter, Rodolph, the Count Chandoce, Baron Mount Gosline, and Hector Placide entered an unfrequented part of the Bois de Boulogne, and there awaited the coming of George De Lesparre and his friends.

For some moments they waited impatiently, and then Hector remarked, more for the sake of saying something which might direct his mind from the gloomy thoughts which filled it than for any other reason:

"We are before our time."

"Can he have mistaken the appointed place?" asked Rodolph, anxiously, for he was fearful something might occur which would rob him of the revenge he promised himself.

"Impossible!" declared Mount Gosline, "I described the spot to O'Hara. I told him to take the first turn to the left in the third avenue. Here they are!" he added as O'Hara, De Lesparre and his second, entered the little clearing where Rodolph and Hector stood.

"I regret, sir," said De Lesparre to Rodolph, "to have caused any delay," and then turning to the others: "Gentlemen, I am at your service."

"Is it not possible to arrange this affair without resort to these extremities?" asked Mount Gosline, with a faint hope that his office as peace-maker might be successful. "A dispute at a card-table cannot be so serious a matter."

"We are losing time, gentlemen," said Rodolph, impatiently.

"Excuse me," said Hector, "you are in our hands, and have nothing to say in this matter." Then turning to O'Hara: "Major, we suggest that your noble principles will be satisfied with a less deadly strife than may result from firearms. We propose swords."

"We are the provoked side," said the major with some show of anger, "and I presume you are aware that we are entitled to the choice of arms."

"And you choose pistols," said Rodolph, quickly, as he threw off his overcoat. "Be it so."

"He's trembling with rage," whispered O'Hara to De Lesparre. "He couldn't hit a haystack at ten paces. How do you feel?"

"I feel that that man means to kill me if he can," answered De Lesparre, in the same low tone.

"And he will if you let him," said O'Hara. "Be steady and quick. He's a fine big target; you can't miss him."

While this conversation was going on, Mount Gosline and O'Hara were engaged in loading the pistols, and as they finished, the major said to Hector:

"Shall I arrange this affair or will you?"

"I confess, sir," replied Hector, with a very perceptible sneer in his tone, "my professional experience in such sorry business is so limited that I might corrupt the noble principles we are here to witness, if I pretend to direct what I know so little about."

"I'm delighted to afford you instruction, young gentleman," said the major in a gleeful tone. "We set our men, if you please, at twenty-four paces apart. At the signal, they will advance to these limits," and he placed two swords on the ground, about five paces apart; "as they approach they will fire when they like. The one that fires first, stops at the spot when he delivers his shot; the other man may then walk up and pot him if he can."

"Do you understand?" Hector asked of Rodolph.

"Yes," was the reply.

"Then here are the arms," said O'Hara, offering Rodolph the choice of pistols, and as he took it, the other was handed to De Lesparre, and the major

cried out, much as if he were officiating at some festive game:

"Now, gentlemen, will you place yourselves?"

The last act had come, and in a few moments the "grim dice of the iron game" would be invoked to decide between the honor of the two men who were now about to face each other in mortal combat.

Mount Gosline attended Rodolph, while O'Hara did the same for De Lesparre, and then the men walked to the limits to wait for the word.

As O'Hara returned, after whispering a few words of advice in his principal's ear, he called:

"Are you ready, gentlemen? Go!"

Slowly the two men approached each other, carefully watching each movement, and ready to discharge their weapons whenever they could do so with the most deadly effect.

About half the distance between the starting point and the limit marked by the swords, De Lesparre halted, and quick as thought aimed his weapon at Rodolph and fired.

Almost with the report of the pistol, Rodolph staggered back, his right arm fell by his side, and his weapon dropped from his nerveless grasp.

Both O'Hara and Hector sprung to his assistance, but before they could reach him he waved them back, saying:

"Stand back—'tis nothing!"

The ball had shattered the bone of his right arm, but he was not to be deprived of the shot which belonged to him. With a great deal of exertion he succeeded in picking up the pistol with his left hand, and then advanced toward De Lesparre with the firm determination to avenge his wrongs.

George De Lesparre nerved himself for the shot, which he expected must come, and looked full in his opponent's face without flinching. He had had his shot, and according to the terms of the agreement, Rodolph must have his, and with it must come death, for the count had advanced close to his intended victim, and the pistol was within two feet of De Lesparre's heart.

Hard and cruel were the lines about Rodolph's mouth, as he realized that his enemy was completely in his power, and he was determined to make the most of the advantage which chance had given him. But as he was about to pull the trigger, and thus end the life of a fellow-creature, all that was good and noble in his nature rebelled against the act, and he hesitated, let fall the weapon, and said hoarsely:

"I give you your life!"

For a moment De Lesparre could not understand the position of affairs, and then the thought of how he would stand in the eyes of the world came over him, and he said, passionately:

"You have branded that life with infamy. You would send me back to the world with a dishonored name. Kill me—you have the right—or withdraw the charge you have made."

"You branded my heart," replied Rodolph, bitterly, between his closed teeth. "You have desolated my home, and sent me out into the world blighted."

"Your imputation will ruin an innocent man," exclaimed De Lesparre.

"Your imputation has ruined an innocent woman. I know my wife is not guilty, but you have contaminated her image in my breast. Go—but face to face with your dishonor as she must do—share the bitter cup you filled for me. Shame for shame—we are quits."

And Rodolph turned to his friends, leaving De Lesparre to face the scorn and contempt of the world, who, while they believed he had cheated at cards, would banish him from their midst; but had they known the real cause of the quarrel, would only have lightly censured him for his folly.

CHAPTER XIX.

RODOLPH'S wound was not dangerous, but it prevented him from using his right arm for some months, and during the greater portion of that time he was confined to the house.

George De Lesparre had left Paris with a stain upon his name, and no one knew anything of his whereabouts.

The state of affairs in the Chandoce household was exactly as Rodolph had marked out during his interview with Armande, previous to the duel. They lived under the same roof, but never spoke to each other save when before strangers, and then only that the world might not know that they were other than what they seemed.

To Armande's affectionate nature this estrangement, which she could not believe was through any real fault of hers, was most harassing; but she strove nobly to conceal the real state of her feelings and tried to divert her mind by taking a more lively interest in Mathilde's affairs.

She insisted on teaching her step-daughter to paint, and after a few weeks took the entire charge of her musical education.

Hector and the Baron Mount Gosline still continued constant visitors upon Rodolph and his family.

As soon as Rodolph was able to bear the journey, they all went to his chateau, where we first met them, and it is there that we will again introduce the reader, at the time when the Count Chandoce's wound was nearly healed.

The family were all seated in Rodolph's library. Armande, pale and wan, was seated by the table, sewing, and every now and then she would lift her large, mournful eyes to her husband, who was seated in another part of the room reading a paper.

Mathilde, gay, vivacious as ever, was engaged upon a small landscape, and the baron was leaning over her in a love-sick position.

The countess, sour and forbidding as ever, was engaged upon some knitting, which she seemed always to have with her, while the baroness, affecting the employments of youth, was listlessly turning the pages of music which stood upon the music-rack.

"I cannot see, baron," said Mathilde, petulantly, as Mount Gosline leaned over her with a greater show of affection; "you obscure my light."

"I'll stand here," said the baron, dutifully, as he moved a short distance away and stood in what he thought a languishing position.

"Now you distract me. Why don't you take a book and read?" and her tone was certainly not all a lover could wish for.

"Your presence would distract me," replied Mount Gosline, mournfully.

"You never read," and now there was almost a sneer in Mathilde's voice.

"Oh, yes," insisted the baron, thinking that now he had a chance to say a few words which should move his charmer; "I do—in the silent hours of night, when all is still, when the world is at rest. Then arise dreams of thee, in the first sweet sleep of night."

The baron paused to note the effect of these words. He felt that he had said something very fine, and was positive that it could not fail of bringing some response from Mathilde.

Imagine his discomfiture when, without even looking at him, Mathilde took her painting to her mother and said:

"There, that is done. Is that better, mother, dear?"

"It is very good, indeed," said Armande. "Show it to your father."

"Look, papa!" said Mathilde, doing as she was bidden.

"Did you do that?" asked Rodolph, in some surprise, as he looked critically at the drawing.

"Yes," replied Mathilde, with a slight hesitation; "that is, mamma helped me, you know."

"I did not know she could paint," said Rodolph; and encouraged by his voice, Mathilde commenced to sound her mother's praises.

"Nor I," said she, "until a few months ago, when she corrected one of my drawings. Since then she

has taught me. She paints beautifully, and do you know, papa, my music teacher has gone away. He would not stop."

"Why so?"

"He said mamma taught me better than he could. I had no idea till lately how accomplished she is—and so patient with me—so good. I can get on twice as fast with her as with—"

"That will do," said Rodolph, almost impatiently. He could not have even his daughter speak so highly of the woman whom he, in his arrogance and pride, had cast off from him as if she were the guilty thing he had almost accused her of being.

"Papa, dear," said Mathilde, after a moment's pause.

"What's the matter now?" asked Rodolph, as he stroked his daughter's soft, rich hair.

"I want to say something to you in private," and the young girl's face and neck were dyed in a rich crimson as she spoke.

"O ho! In private?" laughed Rodolph. "Very well; I think I know what it is about."

Mathilde did not wait to hear more, but in order to hide her confusion, went to the baron and commenced to talk very rapidly and almost confidentially to him, thereby making him one of the happiest of men, and completely deceiving her father as to the real state of her feelings.

"The baron has proposed to her," thought Rodolph, "and she is going to ask my permission to marry him. Poor Hector! I'd have given the rest of my worthless life to have seen her married to him."

For several moments the Count Chandoce mused upon his own unenviable position, and at last arousing himself, he asked:

"Where's Hector? Who has seen him this evening?"

Mathilde, the countess and baroness all answered as with one accord:

"I gave him a little commission."

"Really, ladies," said Rodolph, laughing, "you take advantage of that good-natured fellow."

As he spoke, and as if the conversation had really been the means of bringing him, Hector entered, almost loaded down with bundles.

After greeting the occupants of the room, Hector delivered the bundles to their respective owners, receiving from each a careless acknowledgment of the obligation.

"I suppose you have dined," said Hector.

"No, Hector," said Armande, "I delayed the dinner until your return," and ringing the bell, she gave the necessary orders to the servant.

"Let us take a turn in the park until it is ready," said the baroness, rising. "Hector, will you give me your arm? A little exercise will give us an appetite."

"A little exercise," muttered Hector to Mount Gosline; "I've had ten miles already," and then turning to the baroness, he said, while he offered his arm, as cordially as though he had not left the house during the day:

"I shall be happy, baroness."

Mount Gosline could not understand how any one could discommode themselves for the sake of obliging others, and he naturally thought that Hector's willingness arose from some interested motive.

"That fellow is trying to get on the weak side of that old woman," he thought. "He thinks that I cannot see his game."

It was a happy thought for the baron, and although he did not book it, he did the next best thing, which was to offer his escort to the countess for a walk in the park also. And the two followed Hector and the baroness.

When they had left the room, Rodolph said to Mathilde, who had again busied herself with her paints:

"Leave us for a moment, and come back when I am alone."

Mathilde obeyed.

"You wished to speak to me?" said Armande, rising from her chair and going toward her husband.

"Yes," replied Rodolph with a business-like air. "Mathilde has received a proposal—at least I believe she desires to tell me so. You have noticed the baron's attentions?"

"Yes, with regret."

"I have no wish to influence her choice, even though I could have wished—"

Rodolph stopped quickly. He had schooled himself to talk to Armande without betraying any feeling, and he knew that should he begin to speak of his wishes in connection with his daughter, his voice would soften despite all he could do, and he believed that to allow it to do so would be to betray a weakness on his part.

"We can now regard her marriage as decided," he continued, coldly, "and the moment is at hand to remember the agreement we made some time ago."

"I have not forgotten it," said Armande. "You mean—" and here her voice faltered; she could not finish the sentence, and Rodolph continued it by saying, almost fervently:

"Her marriage, and our separation. Have you spoken to your mother on the subject?"

"No."

"It will be better if she should know nothing of what has happened."

"Yes," assented Armande, she could not trust her voice to speak.

"You will return to Paris on a visit to the baroness," continued Rodolph, coldly.

"I would rather—if you will permit me," and now Armande had to exercise all her will, and then she did not succeed in choking back the sobs that almost prevented her from speaking, "remain here, under our—I mean your roof, with your mother."

"Here?" asked Rodolph, in surprise. "I do not think you would be happy here."

"I do not think I shall be happy anywhere."

There was a long pause, and when Rodolph spoke again his voice had lost much of its coldness and metallic harshness.

"Why do you wish to remain in this house?" he asked.

"That I may live in the presence of the past."

"I do not understand you," said Rodolph.

Armande turned sorrowfully away, as she replied:

"No! and I—I cannot explain without—it is too late now! But if you will let me, I would like to live here, where you were born, with the old people amongst whom your boyhood was passed amidst—" She was now venturing upon a topic she knew she could not speak of without betraying more agitation than she would have her husband see, and she stopped abruptly, and then added: "When you wish to return, I will go away. Will you permit me to do this?"

It was now Rodolph who turned his face away, lest what was working in his heart should be read there, and strong as he was in his own honor and integrity, he could only answer:

"Yes."

"Thank you," said Armande, as she slowly left the room.

As soon as she was gone, Rodolph gave a sigh of relief, or sorrow, and muttered, as he sank back in his chair, exhausted with the mental conflict:

"Too late—it is too late! I am glad she left me. How weak I feel to-day!"

CHAPTER XX.

For some time Rodolph remained in a profound reverie, which was broken by the entrance of Mathilde.

"Papa, are you alone?" asked the young girl, entering timidly.

"Yes, I am alone. Come here."

Mathilde seated herself on a footstool at her father's feet, and waited for him to speak to her.

"Well, now, what is it?" he asked, pleasantly.

"Well," and Mathilde looked up very confidentially, "I've a great secret to tell you!"

"Oh, a secret!" laughed the count; "and suppose I've guessed this mighty secret already? Let me tell it to you. You love somebody, and somebody wants to marry you."

"Oh, papa!" exclaimed Mathilde, clasping her hands in an ecstasy of delight that she had been saved the embarrassment of confessing exactly what her father had guessed.

"And I give my consent," continued Rodolph. "There, the baron has my permission to ask your hand of me, and you may tell him so."

"How good you are!" exclaimed the young girl, with a demure little grimace upon her fair face; "but you have only guessed half my secret," she said, archly.

"Only half?"

"That's all!" and now Mathilde blushed violently. "The love part was right; but you have guessed the wrong one."

"Do you mean to say that you are not in love with the baron?" and now Rodolph was astonished.

"Not the least little bit!" declared Mathilde.

"But with whom? there's nobody else!"

"Yes, there is!" persisted the young girl, as she hung her head, "there's—the other one."

"What other?" asked her father, a little impatiently, and then as a sudden light dawned upon him he asked, half-doubtingly: "You don't mean Hector?"

"Yes, if you please, papa." This was said very timidly.

"What!" and with the exclamation Rodolph took his daughter's hands in his, and looked at her with a happy, quizzing expression in his eyes:

"Do you mean to look me in the face, and tell me that you want to marry Hector Placide?"

Now Mathilde entirely mistook her father's look of joy. She quite believed that such a marriage would be distasteful to him, and she faltered piteously:

"Oh, dear—dear papa! I know my grandmamma don't like him, but I hoped you would not refuse!"

"Refuse!" exclaimed the now happy count, while the tears of surprise and joy almost choked his utterance. "I—I don't deserve this. You love Hector—but, my dear child, if I could have put my heart into your breast, it could not have prompted you to a better choice. But since when did you discover that you loved him?"

Now was Mathilde happy, and resting her head on her father's breast, she answered his question in a low voice, tremulous with joy and thanksgiving:

"Since I perceived his goodness, gentleness and truth."

"But you saw these a year ago!"

"No; not until mamma opened my eyes."

"Armande—" began Rodolph, but Mathilde interrupted him, by saying:

"While you were so ill, we passed our time together—here alone—and somehow I grew to know her so much better. I began to see the world with her eyes; she raised me above it, and I saw what was beautiful and good—why—I—I—I saw that I loved—"

"Your cousin Hector?" added Rodolph, as the young girl, in the timidity of her first love, could not so boldly speak the name of the man whom she loved, but who had not even asked her to be his.

"Yes; and she said she thought—" and suddenly remembering that she was betraying her mother's confidence, she said archly:

"Don't betray me if I tell you?"

"No," replied Rodolph, for his daughter was making a revelation to him he had not dreamed of.

"She said it would please you," continued Mathilde.

"And it does please me! I'll speak to him at once."

"Oh, don't, papa, dear!" exclaimed the young girl, frightened at the thought that her secret was about to be made known.

"Don't what?" laughed the count, enjoying her confusion.

"Don't speak to Hector—or at least not like that."

"And why, pray?"

"He might refuse me."

"I don't think he will," and Rodolph's eyes twinkled with the satisfaction he felt; "but we shall have to overcome another obstacle—the opposition of your two grandmothers."

"Oh, I can manage that," said Mathilde, confidently.

"What! manage those two old ladies!" and now Rodolph was indeed surprised, for with all his skill he had never been able to effect such a happy idea.

"Yes," said Mathilde, archly, "I shall tell grandmother Chandoce that the baroness won't hear of the marriage. And I'll tell the grandmamma baroness that the countess opposes it. So—you understand?" and the merry girl nodded her head triumphantly.

"Between the two negatives you will get an affirmative, you little rogue!"

At this stage of the conversation Hector entered the room, and with glowing face, and with upraised finger to warn her father not to speak to Hector then, the confused Mathilde tried to leave the room unobserved.

CHAPTER XXI.

FORTUNATELY for Mathilde, an opportunity was given her to make her exit in a perfectly natural manner, for as Hector entered, he said:

"The baroness sent me for her shawl."

"I know where it is," said Mathilde, eagerly. "I will take it to her. I think papa wants you."

"Me?" asked Hector, looking around in surprise.

"Yes—that is I think so," said Mathilde, hurriedly, as she ran away.

"What's the matter with Mathilde to-day?" asked Hector of Rodolph. "She looks quite—I don't know how."

"No wonder," replied Rodolph, determined to tease Hector a little. "I need not conceal from you my little family arrangement in prospect. The truth is, Mathilde is going to be married."

"To be married!" Hector stammered, as he reeled like one dazed by a sun-stroke.

"What is the matter?" asked Rodolph, enjoying his confusion. "There is nothing very surprising in that?"

"No—noth—nothing whatever," Hector managed to say. "Of course, she—she deserves to be—that is—I sincerely hope she will be happy."

"I have no doubt of it."

"I need not ask if you approve of her choice?"

"Oh, perfectly. She has chosen the very man of all others I preferred."

Hector choked back a sob, and taking Rodolph's hand, said in a tolerably firm voice:

"I congratulate you! I do, really—with all my heart. God bless you and her—her especially."

"My dear Hector," said the count, thinking that he had carried his sport far enough, "the man she has chosen is yourself!"

Hector sank into a chair, entirely unnerved by the welcome but unexpected news.

"Me?" he asked, trying to understand it all. "I say, Rodolph, don't, there's a good fellow! I like a joke, but this is rather a cruel one. I have loved her in secret since she was a child."

"Oh! you call that a secret, do you?" and Rodolph laughed heartily. "Why, it was as plain as the nose on your face."

This remark was made innocently enough by Rodolph, but it instantly reminded Hector of what he considered his personal defects, and he asked, disconsolately:

"That's it. Do you suppose she could ever get over such a face?"

"You had better ask her—there she is," said Rodolph, as the young lady passed the door. "Come here, Mathilde, I've told Hector that you loved him, and he won't believe me!" As he spoke, Rodolph took her by the arm gently, and led her up to Hector, who said eagerly:

"She does not deny it! She would not joke on such a subject! Mathilde—I beg pardon, mam'selle, I don't know what I'm saying. I think I'm going to cry."

"Hector?" said Mathilde, timidly.

"What shall I do? Would it be ridiculous if I were to go down on my knees to thank you? Because—don't you see—you don't know, you can't know what—what I feel."

"I think I do," said Mathilde, so archly that Hector could not for the life of him help embracing her.

"I am so happy," exclaimed the young girl, as with Hector's arm around her waist she looked up into his face.

"It depends upon yourself to remain so," said Armande, who had entered unobserved, and taking Mathilde's hands affectionately, she continued:

"You are supremely happy now. But do not think your life is going to be eternal sunshine, or that you are his sole care. Recollect that men sustain the double burden of our common lives. They have thoughts, hopes and pleasures apart from us. Don't be jealous if he finds them in society you can not share. When he comes home do not receive him with a bitter or dark look. A soft word, a greeting smile, are golden threads that, woven tenderly about a man's heart, wrap it around and around until it lies enmeshed in willing and eternal slavery. Bless you, my sweet Mathilde! Go, take your happiness into the air, and give it wing."

As Armande concluded, Hector, anxious to be alone with the woman he so dearly loved, took her hand and was about to lead her to the garden, when Rodolph, who while Armande had been speaking, had seated himself in the furthest part of the room, arose and said:

"Stay, Hector! One word. All Armande has said is true; but don't let all the sacrifices be on Mathilde's side. Don't put her virtues too often to proof. If you have quarrels, no matter if she be in fault, be the first to seek reconciliation. Remember she is the weaker sex. All girls are romantic; don't ridicule those fond effusions. Romance is virtue carried to exaggeration. That affluence of her love is a sacred offering none but a madman would outrage, none but a fool despise!"

As he finished speaking he turned away as if to leave the room, and Armande, who had been listening intently to all he said, sank back in her chair, sick and discouraged.

"Now is the time for them to heal the breach," whispered Hector to Mathilde, and understanding him, the young girl went to her father, and throwing her arms about his neck, whispered, as she quoted her father's words which he had just used:

"If you have quarrels, be the first to seek reconciliation—no matter if she be in fault. Remember she is the weaker sex."

Rodolph hesitated. He could, like all men, give the advice; but to practice it was an entirely different thing.

But Mathilde, with her arm in his, drew him on, and leading him to her mother, left him.

For a moment he remained undecided, and then, as if conquering himself by a severe mental effort, he approached Armande and said:

"Armande, we have been astray. I have deserved to lose you, for I despised your love; and if for a moment your heart has strayed—"

"Never, Rodolph, never!" exclaimed Armande, joyously, as she threw herself into his arms.

"I believe you," and Count Chandoce impressed a kiss of mingled love and respect upon his young wife's fair forehead.

Dear reader, when could we find a more fitting time to take leave of our characters and of you; and as the end of the quarrel between man and wife, may you also say of my story, that it was fitting that we should at this time declare that we had reached

THE END.

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Beadle and Adams, Publishers,
No. 98 William street, New York.